MISS PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

by

CONCORDIA MERREL

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BY

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CHAPTER I

Hetty Carol finished dusting the sitting room at No. 39, Tag Street, and occupied herself for a few moments in going round the room putting finishing touches. She was late to-day; it was already nearly four o'clock, and she had only just finished the housework. There had seemed to be so much to do.

She set the ornaments on the mantelpiece precisely in order; punched up a cushion on the couch; perked up a drooping flower in a vase, and in passing the narrow bay window, stopped to straighten a curtain.

Then stood, and looked out into the drab little street of small, colourless houses, with a quick flick of interest in her grey eyes.

There was a right-angle bend in Tag Street, and No. 39 was the first house round that bend, so that the bay window faced up the main length of the road; and at the far end, round the corner on the left where Mr. Ruffle's little grocery store stood—half of it in Tag Street and half in Blossom Lane—a telegraph boy had suddenly bicycled into view, and was coming along in her direction.

He was not hurrying; on the contrary, he seemed to regard the quiet of this side street as specially designed for the practice of trick cycling.

Hetty watched him, amused at his antics; smiling, but all the same wondering, with a touch of impatience, which house he was bound for, and what kind of a message it might be that he carried so light-heartedly. Telegraph boys were not often seen in Tag Street.

She did not for a moment imagine that he was coming to No. 39, because nothing that held such possibilities of being strange or startling, as a telegram, ever *did* come there.

Life, in Tag Street, was very prone to be like Tag Street itself; narrow; drab; poor.

And, what was worse, respectably poor. Poor with the sort of poverty that must show a decent coat to the world, even though its shirt is in rags beneath.

Tag Street lay somewhere between the main streets and the back streets of the suburb of Penbury.

And the dwellers in Tag Street's dingy little houses reflected this neither one thing nor the other position. They were people who "went to business," but mostly in such a small, struggling, ill-paid way—(anyone who ever did anything in any more significant way didn't remain a dweller in Tag Street)—that for the most part they were up against the proposition of having to keep up some semblance of a main street appearance on less than a back street income, which, as Hetty knew from experience, was no picnic.

The responsibility of having to take the place of the sweet-eyed, blessed woman who had been her mother, and who, in dying, had left her, five years ago, to a feeling of blank loneliness that had seemed to be something more terrible than just motherlessness; of having to care for her father and her school-girl sister, Bella; of having to wrestle with domestic problems, rendered acute by high prices and precarious income; of having to scrub and sweep, and wash and sew, kept Hetty to a very rigid routine; kept her world reduced to the narrow limits of the neighbourhood.

And there would be, sometimes, a wistfulness in those starry grey eyes of hers as they looked out of the window, up the little street. For the part of "Little Mother" is so much easier to play for the movies than it is in real life.

But if the circumstances of her life kept her physically within such narrow bondage, there was a spirit in Hetty that was never wholly bound.

She had been born possessed of that disturbing quality that is known as "temperament"; it gave to her sensibilities, a subtlety which she herself could not understand; it gave her that sense of fitness which is hazily called a "feeling for things." Things displeased her; repelled her; filled her with delight; or wrung her with pity; and she could not have told why. She felt the urge

of all sorts of vague wishes, and could explain neither what she wished, nor why she wished at all. She could almost ache with longing for—she knew not what.

For Hetty, at seventeen, there was always a vision beyond the drabness, even though it remained hazy, elusive; always a dream woven into the monotony, though, for her life, she could not, at this time, have interpreted it.

Suddenly the interest in her eyes grew brighter. The telegraph boy had reached the corner. She leaned forward to see him go by. But he didn't go by. He stopped, dismounted, propped his bicycle against the curb, and kicked open the gate.

Hetty started back from the window, her heart quick with excitement; with a touch of fear, too. A telegram, especially where one is not often seen, carries a world of ominous, as well as delightful, possibilities. . . .

She went out to the front door.

The boy, delivering the flame-coloured envelope into her hand, said carelessly:

"Carol?" and, duty done, turned and gazed up the street with an air of complete detachment.

Hetty looked down at the envelope in her hand; read her name upon it; turned it, and, with fingers not perfectly steady, tore it open, and took out the message it contained. . . .

She remained silent for so long that the boy looked back and asked:

"Any answer?"

She started, and raised her eyes; shocked, bewildered, unbelieving eyes. . . . Tragic stars, now, set in the silky clouds of her dusky hair. . . .

"Answer?" she stammered. "Oh, no . . . there's . . . there's no answer. . . ."

The boy left her, whistling as he went, and she shut the door slowly after him.

In the narrow passage, by courtesy called the hall, she stood staring down at the telegram she held, feeling dazed, overwhelmed by a sense of disaster.

When she raised her face and looked around her, slowly, that curious shocked unbelief was still in her eyes, as if the coming

of that telegram had changed things so, that even the familiar little hall seemed strange to her. . . .

Then she went back to the sitting room, and sank rather suddenly, as if her knees had failed her, into a chair. She looked straight before her, helplessly, waiting for the first shock to pass; for her brain to function again, so that she could shape up this sudden chaos that the telegram had brought, into thoughts and get it clear to herself.

Presently she looked down and read the message again, and thought began to stir; scrappily at first, and still unbelievingly. . . .

Her father and Mrs. Dowse. . . . It wasn't possible; wasn't to be believed! And yet there it was; written clearly enough for anyone to read. . . .

"Me and Mrs. Dowse married this morning. . . ." "Mrs. Dowse!" She said the name out loud, to convince herself that she had seen it right; and read the message yet again.

"Me and Mrs. Dowse married this morning. . . . Going Southend for honeymoon. Home Sunday, mind and get house ready. Dad. . . ."

"It's true, then." She said that to herself, for up to this moment she really had not been able to believe it.

But Mrs. Dowse. . . . Widow of the man who had kept the King's Head public house in the High Street. . . . Mrs. Dowse was awful. . . . Simply awful, with her large fat face, and her yellow hair that never in this world had been born yellow . . . and her loud laugh. . . .

She had never even met Mrs. Dowse until five or six weeks ago, and certainly had never guessed that her father knew her so well, or thought especially of her. . . .

Thought broke into words again.

"To go and do it all without telling me! But I might have seen something was the matter this morning at breakfast. . . . Dad was so queer . . . he got that sort of excited way with him, and couldn't sit still . . . and went off in a hurry. . . ."

Words lapsed back again into thought . . . as she sat dumbly picturing her father's departure this morning. . . .

Yes, and he had taken a suit-case with him. . . . She had seen it as he went up the road. . . . He must have had it all

ready packed. But she had only thought it was packed with papers, such as he sometimes took to business; and he so often got that fidgetty, nervy way with him. . . .

"Oh, but I might have *known* something was up! I might have guessed!" she cried out, rising quickly, the telegram clenched up tight in her hand. Only she hadn't guessed; and the shock of it now was overwhelming. . . . She stood straight and taut.

What could her father be thinking of? Mrs. Dowse; after the woman who had been Mrs. Carol. That loud-voiced, vulgar-tongued, gaudy-coloured woman, after the gentle mother who had seemed to carry a sense of loveliness and light with her wherever she went. Why? in the name of anything, *why?*

Easier, far, to ask the question than to find its answer.

"There's no reason," she told herself. "There's never any reason for awful things like this. . . . They just happen. . . . She'll sit where mother used to sit and pour out tea like mother used to; and flash her rings. . . . and oh, I don't know! I don't know!"

She moved round abruptly and went to the window, with the impulse to get away from her thoughts, but found that she had only carried them with her. . . .

"They must have had the banns called and everything, without letting me know . . ." she went on. "He must have got the day off. . . . Being Friday I suppose the firm didn't mind. . . . Home Sunday, and I'm to mind and get the house ready . . . ! For *her* . . . !"

She drew a sudden, quick, shaking breath. . . . "What's he done it for? What's he *done* it for?" she whispered brokenly. "He can't love her . . . He simply *can't* . . . And yet . . . I suppose he must. . . ." She stared out into the street with unhappy, brooding eyes.

Out of silence came a sudden flash of understanding.

"No; it's just that he likes that sort of thing . . . jolliness, and . . . and all that. . . ." Her thought was quite clear, but she could only haltingly put it into words. "It's just that he *likes* it. I've seen it in him. His eyes get sort of all lit up . . . and his moustache goes quivery. . . . And he laughs up high and behaves . . . so as I wish he wouldn't. . . . It's nothing anyone can get hold of . . . but I've *seen* it. . . ."

It was an explanation that brought no comfort with it, and silence closed down upon her again; a silence through which she seemed neither to think nor to see. . . .

Presently, she flung away from the window and went back to her chair.

She sat down feeling bewildered, lost. . . .

There was no one she could turn to. She didn't make friends easily enough to have discovered intimates in Tag Street.

She had not felt so utterly, overwhelmingly alone, since the day of her mother's death. . . .

"And how am I to tell Bella? How am I to break it to her?" she thought, wretchedly. "I hate that kid to be *hurt*. . . ."

She sat for a long time lost in these thoughts; so lost, that when a knocking at the front door sounded, she started up and stood straight and tense. . . .

The knocking was repeated with a familiar impatience before she relaxed and said,

It's Bell . . . of course, . . ." and tucking the telegram into the pocket of her skirt she went quickly to the front door.

But not too quickly for the knocking to go booming through the little house yet again, before she reached the door and flung it open.

It was a highly offended little Bella who flounced into the hall saying:

"What's the matter with you, I'd like to know? There I've been knocking for about half an hour. . . ."

And she slammed down her satchel into the base of the hat stand, tugged off her hat and flung it down on top of the satchel, shook out her long golden curls, and looked up at Hetty, her pink and white prettiness distorted by a pettish expression.

Full of the news she had to give her little sister, Hetty said, with a touch of nervous breathlessness:

"Not half an hour, Bell, surely. . . ."

"Pretty near, anyway. . . . What d'you want to go and keep me waiting for?"

"I'm sorry, darling. . . . I've had such a lot to. . . ."

"Oh, you *always* say you've had such a lot to do," interrupted Bella. . . .

"No, to . . . to think about, I was going to say," said Hetty.

"Oh, well, where's tea? I'm starving. . . ."

And the little girl tossed her curls impatiently and flounced along the passage into the kitchen, in a way that made her short pleated skirt swing round her knees.

Hetty hurried after her.

"I was just going to get it ready," she began, hastily.

"Just going to . . ." echoed Bella, standing in the middle of the kitchen and looking at the unprepared table, her blue eyes wide with astonishment. That tea should not be ready when she came home from school was like the sudden breaking down of a hitherto faultlessly running machine.

"You must of had something special to think about, I must say," she added, and then broke out in pettish vexation. "I *do* think you might look after things a bit, Het. . . . I *do* think it's a bit thick to come home and find tea not even begun, and you wasting time, *thinking*. . . ."

"Oh, Kid!" cried Hetty with a sudden catch in her voice. "Don't quarrel with me! Don't dear; I . . . I can't bear it to-day. . . . There are things so much awfuller than . . . tea not being ready . . ." She broke off and crossed to the gas stove quickly, bending down a little, as she lit a jet beneath the kettle, so that her face was hidden.

Bella's blue eyes followed her, puzzled.

"What on earth's the matter, Het?" she asked more quietly.

"I'll . . . I'll tell you . . ." said Hetty, only she did not immediately begin. She spread the table cloth first, and set the tea things upon it . . . and began cutting bread and butter. Something about her, held Bella silent and wondering for a moment, then she broke out.

"Well, get on with it. . . . What's the bally mystery?" And kneeling on a chair by the table, she reached over and took a lump of sugar from the sugar bowl, popped it into her mouth before Hetty could voice her usual protest, and grinned like a triumphant cherub up into Hetty's grave face.

But Hetty scarcely seemed to notice the theft of the sugar, nor to hear the scrunch of it between Bella's teeth, nor to see the wicked little smile upon her lips. . . .

She had stopped in her cutting of the bread and butter, and stood, one hand round the knife, the other over the top of the loaf, and looked down into the childish face with strangely serious eyes.

"Belle, what would you say if . . ." she paused.

She had to swallow hard before she could continue. . . .

" . . . if I was to tell you that . . . that dad's . . . got married again?"

Bella's blue eyes opened roundly; she caught a quick breath, and let it out noisily. . . .

"Married? *Dad?* Hetty!" she said, so breathlessly that her voice barely rose above a whisper.

"Oh, darling . . . don't mind too much. . . ."

"Het," said Bella eagerly," "who is it? When did you hear? When did they do it? Have you seen her? . . ." The questions poured out without a break. They were only stemmed when Hetty shook her head and answered.

"I haven't seen her *since* . . . Darling, it's . . . it's Mrs. Dowse . . ." and she told the story, all she knew of it, as quickly as it could be told and waited for the outburst of distress that she dreaded to see Bella give way to. . . .

But no distress was visible in Bella's pretty face. There came a sudden quick excitement to her big childish eyes.

"And he sent a telegram, telling you?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes."

"Let's have a look at it."

Hetty produced the telegram from her pocket.

"There it is," she said, and gave it to Bella.

The little girl looked it all over. . . .

"A real telegram," she said. . . . "I bet young Ireen Ruffle's never had a telegram come to *her* house." The pretty curls were set dancing again. She read the message aloud.

"It's a long one, isn't it, Het? Must of cost ever so much. . . . Ain't they lucky, though? Going to Southend. . . . Wouldn't I just like to be there with them!" Bella sighed gustily but with relish. "She'll be our 'Step,' won't she, Het?"

Hetty nodded; she couldn't have spoken just at that moment to save her life.

Bella was laughing excitedly; her face pink; her eyes bright.

At ten years old, with no very acute recollections of her mother, this was, to Bella, an event. And she always welcomed anything that could be called an event. She jumped up suddenly from her chair.

"I'm going up to tell that young Ireen," she cried, waving the telegram and was out of the room before Hetty could stop her.

"Bella!" called Hetty, following quickly. . . . "Don't! . . . Come here, . . . Come and have tea. . . . Don't tell anyone. . . . "

But Bella already had the front door open. . . .

"Why shouldn't I tell Ireen?" she flung back over her shoulder.

"But Bella, listen . . . we don't want everyone to know. . . . Not *yet*, Bell. . . . "

Bella, wilful and spoilt—a great deal more wilful and spoilt than Hetty realised—would not listen. She made a pouting face and ran, laughing, out through the gate and up the street towards the corner grocery.

Hetty watched her, angry for a moment at her disobedience, then turned and went back into the kitchen, her anger giving way to a feeling of helplessness.

After all, she thought unhappily, why shouldn't Ireen Ruffle know? Everyone would know on Monday. . . . But there was a sort of wild lack of fastidiousness in rushing off with the news in this excited way. She had dreaded Bella's distress at hearing the news; but distress would have been easier to endure than this incontinent excitement.

She covered that thought quickly, with excuses; Bella was such a child. . . . Too young to understand. Too young to remember their mother as *she* remembered her; too young to draw the same hurting comparisons. . . . Too young to realise what had happened. . . . She was always ready to make excuses for Bella. . . .

Tea was ready when Bella returned, flushed and eager, and out of breath with running.

"Het!" she cried, "we're going to be rich. . . . Ireen's father says Dowse died worth a lot of money; he'd just sold the pub

when he had to go and die . . . and he says all that'll come to our 'Step!' Oh, I didn't half take the shine out of young Ireen——!"

She flounced down into her chair and stretched out a hand for a piece of bread and jam. . . .

"Bread and butter first," said Hetty, with the mechanicalness of long custom.

Bella pouted, but obeyed; she was too excited to care much.

"I've always told her that *my* dad went to business, which was a jolly sight classier than keepin' a shop. . . . And now it's proved, isn't it? And Ireen's father says he hopes we'll still patronise the old firm." She gave a cute imitation of the fat, pompous grocer. . . . "And I says I didn't know, I'm sure. Our step *might* want to patronise some place with a lot more *tone* to it. . . . Tong, you know; like they say in French. . . ." Bella tossed the curls till they jumped like golden springs round her face.

"Bella," said Hetty abruptly. "Can you remember mother at all?"

Bella nodded, her mouth too full, at the moment, to speak; then:

"Yes, of course I can. Sort of palish, wasn't she, Het? And thin, too. . . . And tired. . . ."

"Yes," said Hetty, with a quiver. "I'm afraid she was often tired. . . ."

"Not jolly like Mrs. Dowse, I mean."

"Not like Mrs. Dowse in *any* way!" cried Hetty, and felt hot with quick anger for the suggestion of comparison. But the anger died as quickly as it had arisen.

"She doesn't understand. . . . She's such a kid . . ." she thought. For, to her, Bella was always the fat, five-year-old baby thing that her mother had put into her care. She had made the care faithfuly close and watchful; close, indeed, beyond the point of clear focus. But in her own inexperience she did not realize that. That Bella did and said things, sometimes, that jarred her through and through, she knew; but the same excuse always served: Bella was such a kid; too young to understand. She scarcely realised just how rapidly Bella was growing

up. At ten, there was already a distant hint of maturity in the plump, pink prettiness of her.

Her eyes, big and blue and childishly wide, none the less held the first shadow of precocious knowingness in their gaze. Her lips were full, richly red; bewitchingly pretty in their curve and softness, but with a suggestion of wilfulness in their pouting lines.

But whatever of these things Hetty saw in her, she saw as the lingering of the baby in her; not as the foreshadowing of the woman. . . .

So she listened to Bella's excited chatter, smothering the hurt in her heart with the constant repetition:

"She doesn't understand. . . . She's such a kid. . . . You couldn't expect her even to *remember*. . . ."

* * *

With a craving for action, she started on her preparations for the second Mrs. Carol, immediately after tea. She determined that the house should be spotless. The very fact that she was dreading and resenting the intrusion of her father's new wife, made her do her part with faultless fidelity.

It was midnight before Hetty went to bed. She was afraid to face the night until she was tired enough to sleep. By action, she could smother thought; but with stillness came the sweeping sense of disaster again.

She remembered the nights that had followed her mother's death, and this was something that seemed almost like a second death. . . .

She undressed quickly and turned to the bed she shared with Bella. Bella was, as usual, taking up considerably more than her half of the bed. Standing, looking down into the sleeping face, Hetty felt herself swept by a passion of protectiveness. . . .

Mrs. Dowse shouldn't touch Bella; Bella, in all her rosy prettiness, was her mother's, and as her mother's she should be kept. . . .

She wished Bella would wake up, so that she would not feel quite so alone. . . . And reached out a hand; but it got no further than the tousled curls spread shiningly over the pillow . . . and even then she withdrew it quickly, whispering:

"It's a shame to disturb her. . . ."

She put out the light and crept into bed; carefully, so that she should not waken Bella, but with a little hope stirring in her heart, that the child would waken, of her own accord. . . .

She was tired, but she did not sleep. . . . She had downed thoughts with activity, but they rose now and flooded her mind, bringing alternate resentment and desolation, until she could bear it no longer. . . .

She half rose, and moved Bella gently.

"Darling," she whispered . . . "Move a little. . . . You're right over my side. . . ."

But that was really only her excuse for arousing the little girl. . . .

Bella stirred; flung about, half awoke and murmured:

"Hullo, Het! have you come to bed . . . ?"

"Yes; Bella, I'm right on the edge, dear. . . . Give me a bit more room. . . ."

Bella shifted over to her side of the bed, and Hetty stretched beside her, more comfortably. . . .

"Het," came Bella's drowsy voice, suddenly. "It's true, isn't it?"

"Yes," answered Hetty, "it's true," and she added—"About dad and Mrs. Dowse, d'you mean?"

Bella agreed with a little grunt.

"I thought p'rhaps I'd dreamt it. . . . Het, Ireen says steps beat you and don't give you enough to eat. . . . But that's all rot, isn't it?" The childish voice trailed. . . .

"Just fairy tale," said Hetty, and put an arm around the soft, pliant little body. Bella cuddled up comfortably.

"She gave me a bag of pineapple rock last time I saw her; Mrs. Dowse did . . ." she said, through a big yawn. . . .

"Did she, Bell?"

Bella grunted again.

"And she said my curls were ever so pretty. . . ." The sleepy voice trailed nearer and nearer to silence. . . . "But that young Ireen, she always runs down anything she hasn't got. . . . *She's* . . . only . . . got a . . . real mother. . . ."

Hetty had a feeling that the night had gone suddenly chill. . . .

She caught Bella close, whispering brokenly:

"Darling . . . don't . . . *don't* . . . you *mustn't*. . . . Bella . . . can't you see? Don't you understand? Darling, don't ever forget mother. . . . She was sweet and lovely. . . . Pale, I know, and tired . . . but pale for us, Belle; tired for *us*. . . . Don't ever forget her, sweetie. . . ."

But Bella, snuggling into her arms, was asleep again and Hetty knew that the chill was not in the night but in her own heart. . . .

By Sunday, noon, there was nothing, in the way of preparation for the new Mrs. Carol, left to be done. For the sheer sake of being occupied, Hetty went over things again; polishing where no further polish was possible; sweeping where no dust remained; rubbing where there was no speck. Several trunks and bundles labelled "Mrs. Herbert Carol" had arrived by carrier during Saturday, and the sight of them did not improve Hetty's frame of mind.

The honeymoon couple were scheduled to arrive at nine. By half-past eight Hetty had the supper-table ready; her own place set round the corner to make room for Mrs. Carol at the end; Bella was dressed in the blue silk frock Hetty had made her, for special occasions. Hetty herself was washed, brushed, and changed, so that there was nothing left now, but to sit in the spic-and-span front room, waiting.

Bella's excitement had been high all day, and was still rising. She fidgetted around the room, unable to sit still; bounced on the little couch; preened her blue silk frock; stood before the mirror over the mantelpiece, twisting and polishing her curls; and punctuated the period of waiting with exclamations of:

"I wish they'd buck up . . . Het, what's the time *now?* How long d'you think they'll be?"

Hetty, sitting very straight and still, answered her questioning as steadily as she could, but the strain of these last moments was almost unbearable.

"Hush, now. . . . They'll be here in a minute," she was saying for the twentieth time when, even as she spoke, the clop of horses' hoofs and the scrunch of wheels sounded from the road and stopped outside the house.

"They've come in a cab! They've come in a cab!" screamed

out Bella suddenly, as if the very height of glory had been unexpectedly touched, and she went tumbling into the passage headlong.

Hetty stood for just one moment in the middle of the little room, her slender figure very still and straight, then turned and looked around her, as if unconsciously she bade a mute farewell to life as it had been, before she went out into the passage to meet life as it was to be.

CHAPTER II

As symbolised by the new Mrs. Carol, life as it was to be appeared highly-coloured as a harlequin ice, and huskily loud-voiced as an up-river gramaphone. It seemed to Hetty that she filled the little passageway with her large figure; her large, pink face; her large violet velvet hat with the row of coy, brassy curls beneath; and that her voice must have filled the whole world as she said:

"Well, here we are ducks! Home again and doin' it in style. Herbert, give cabby the price of his fancy to drink our healths in, and say it's from one who knows, with fond love!" A rich gurgle of husky laughter followed.

"Now then, my dears, what d'you think of your new fairy stepmother? All peaches and cream, ain't it? Such a time as we've had and the train that packed! I thought once or twice I'd go off—I did, really. Hetty, lovey, let me sit down and get these boots off—they're something crool."

Hetty led the way into the front room, and Mrs. Carol dropped bulkily into a chair and puffed.

She stuck out her feet, tightly encased in high white boots, and called upon Herbert to come to her aid. Hetty saw her father go down on his knees and start unlacing the boots, while Mrs. Carol leaned back and winked at Hetty.

"Begin as you mean to go on," she said. "Always remember that, lovey, if you's ever soft-hearted enough to take on a husband. Begin as you mean to go on; that's the motter; there ain't none to beat it. I used to tell Dowse so, and I've told you, too, Herbert, haven't I?"

"You have, Lou; you have," answered Mr. Carol, with a high laugh.

And he went on unlacing the boots until he could draw them off; then she sat, with her big-jointed, white-stockinged feet turned over on their outer ankles, her knees spread slackly and blew out a breath.

"Whew! That's better! I've half a mind to do the same to me stays." And that was followed by another outburst of laughter.

The evening went by like a nightmare to Hetty. She felt stricken dumb, as if the power of speech were shrivelled within her. Fortunately Mrs. Carol was so busy pouring out her own flow of talk that Hetty's silence was not observed.

At supper Hetty watched with eyes that had never noticed as they noticed this evening. Afterwards she could recall each detail of that terrible meal, as if it had been cut into her memory; and the thing that was cut clearest of all, was that her father had become a stranger to her. That tragic moment, when one generation looks back at the last, and realises that it is looking across a chasm, struck, for Hetty, that evening.

She looked at her father as if she'd never seen him before. She, who had darned his socks, mended his shirts, cooked his meals, welcomed him every evening, seen him off every morning, given her youth to his service. . . . She simply did not know him. They might have belonged to separate creations.

Herbert Carol made a fluctuating living by representing a firm of printers. Reduced to terms of income it meant that his regular wage was pre-eminently small, and that he existed—shabbily enough, but still existed—by virtue of the commissions he made upon the orders he secured for his firm. Existing upon commissions can be a most luxurious mode of living, but it wasn't for Herbert Carol. For him it meant unceasing grind, unceasing anxiety, unceasing wear and tear upon nerves. And this all showed very plainly in him.

He was only middle tall, thin, with near-set, quick-moving eyes, a bristly moustache that had once, like his hair, been sandy, and was now, also like his hair, going through the red-pepper and salt stage. The tension of existence showed in every line of his face, every glance of his eyes, every nervy movement of his hands. And most especially did it show in those sudden moments of hilarity; that sudden lighting up of the eyes, and that high-pitched, foolish laugh.

He had been high-spirited as a young man; the life in his veins had run eagerly. He couldn't have explained what he was eager about. The nearest he ever got to defining it was that he had

always been "one for a bit of fun." But drab, anxious circumstance had ground that down in him until now it only showed in stupid outbursts. This second marriage of his was a pandering to what remained of it; a snatching and holding tight of such spirit as was left to him. The spirit that was for ever pursuing the will-o'-the-wisp of "A bit of fun."

His ideas as to what constituted fun were vague. They did not appear to include any of the recognised vices. Drink, in any degree in excess of the strictest moderation, made him sick; drugs were things indulged in only by other people. He read about them in the papers, and said:

"Tss-tss; isn't it shocking?"

Woman was a bright, pretty, and—if he understood correctly—a necessary thing. From the standpoint of the flesh, she was also alluring, seductive, and dangerous—in theory. In practice, his flesh was not allured, seduced, nor endangered by her. She might, as it seemed very likely that she would, entirely mess up his life, but that was because, for the moment, the will-o'-the-wisp had assumed her form, in the person of Mrs. Dowse. It was the will-o'-the-wisp that had allured him; not Mrs. Dowse.

Had Hetty been able to see all this, she might have felt, above every other emotion, warm, aching pity for him, but at seventeen she could not be expected to see everything.

She seemed to be looking on at some fantastic dream that was in progress around her; waiting for it to pass, and for life to revert to normality again.

Begin as you mean to go on, being the "motter," Mrs. Carol began immediately after supper.

"I don't like your plain brown curtains, Herbert," she remarked, when they were settled once more in the front room. "Dreary, I calls them."

"Hetty put them up," answered Herbert hastily.

"Ah, well, she's young, ain't you, duckie? You can't be expected to know what's what, same as anyone what's seen life, as I have." And she laid a ring-laden hand upon Hetty's knee and smiled, indulgently. Hetty responded rather palely, feeling that she froze beneath the touch.

"My, but you certainly have got chilly ideas of comfort," went on Mrs. Carol looking round her. "All these plain covers.

. . . Of course, being used to the lounge, I feels it like a bit of a come down. Lovely lounge we had. Dowse had it all done in royal blue plush and gold cords with tassels. . . . Never mind! I'll soon get a bit of lace put in the windows, Hetty, lovey, and what with a few knick-knacks, why, you won't know the place inside of three days. Lovely time we'll have, brightening things up, won't we, ducks? Fit for a bit of company of an evening. . . ."

"It certainly does look dull, now you're here," said Mr. Carol, looking round rather doubtfully.

"Ah, you'll soon find what it means to have a woman round the house again," said Mrs. Carol sentimentally. "Home's not really home when there's no woman to put the finishing touches, like. Not but what Hetty's done her best, bless her little heart. After all, she can't be expected. . . ." And there followed a repetition of all that had already been said, with a second edition of the glories of the lounge.

Hetty could only sit and listen; dazed by it all; the silly jokes; the empty laughter, and that endless drivel of words.

When Mrs. Carol began, as she playfully called it, "putting on her night cap"—out of a decanter—Hetty went to bed, and took Bella with her.

She was not a crying type of girl, but that night, the strain of the last two days, and the culminating torture of the evening, broke in tears. . . . She lay rigidly along the edge of the bed, letting Bella sprawl, unchecked, listening to the little girl's excited chattering, till it trailed away to silence. . . . All the time feeling the fall of tears down each side of her face. . . .

Presently, she turned over, and, her face in her pillow, cried herself stupid. . . .

Long after midnight, from sheer spiritual exhaustion, she slept. . . .

The dream was not of the kind that finishes; during the following weeks Hetty discovered that. And gradually the sense of unreality gave place to cold realisation. Mrs. Carol was here; and she was a permanency. Home now meant Mrs. Carol, meals meant Mrs. Carol; going out, staying in, life itself, seemed to mean—Mrs. Carol. There was no thought that did not ul-

timately have to reckon with her; no plan that did not have, now, to include her.

Hetty tried very hard; very sincerely; she gave way; made concessions; effaced herself until she seemed to have reduced herself to the minimum beyond which she could not go, and live. She tried to find Mrs. Carol's conversation interesting or amusing, or *something* that would arouse in her a feeling other than disgust; and couldn't. She tried to laugh at the jokes that amused Mrs. Carol; tried to admire the things that Mrs. Carol admired; tried to like the people that Mrs. Carol called friends; and failed. Failed utterly. There was no point of contact to be found between them.

Mrs. Carol's mode of life was diametrically opposed to Hetty's. Friction began between them when they met in the morning and ended only when they parted at night.

Hetty's habits of life were instinctively orderly. Existence in the mean streets among struggling people, small interests, narrow outlooks, gossip, and day-by-day drudgery, so far from deadening her impulse to give expression to certain things she felt, lent to it a sort of passion that tinged everything she did. It showed in her attempts at home-making; in her willingness and regularity over the housework; her punctuality and neatness; in the efforts she made in her own dress and in Bella's. And in her sense of responsibility towards the child.

Mrs. Carol had very little sense of responsibility, regularity or restraint. She had a habit of appearing at breakfast in a garment which she called a "wrapper." A billowy affair, of pale blue silk and biscuit-coloured lace, which never looked quite clean. The ritual of washing and of persuading her ample proportions into her corset was not performed until early afternoon; free use of face powder, little dabs of rouge, and a figure more easily imagined than described, being, in her opinion, good enough for the morning. With the wrapper went a babyish cap of blue silk, lace frills and ribbon bows, which concealed the unbrushed condition of her hair; she only saw that the curls lay evenly upon her forehead and frizzed over her ears. Her feet were shoved into pink, quilted slippers, bordered with patchy white fur.

The morning—she admitted it—was not Mrs. Carol's best

time. As she said, she never felt herself till she'd had her dinner. So she slummicked round the house in this get-up, sometimes going to the door to crack a joke with the baker, or to have a little pow-wow with the butcher; or calling out conversational gems, or extracts from the morning paper, from the front room, while Hetty went about her work.

After dinner she would retire to her room, and reappear at the end of perhaps an hour and a half in all the glory of torturous corsets, agonising shoes, silk dress, rings, gold chains, brooches and brilliant studded hair-pins.

If she had let it go at that, time might have enured Hetty to her appearance and her presence, but Mrs. Carol became busy about the house. Soon, wherever Hetty turned her eyes, manifestations of this busyness confronted her.

That sense of fitness, that "feeling for things," of which Hetty was abundantly possessed, was a sense inborn, a rudimentary little shoot of a thing that had had no chance of cultivation, but that pushed its way inevitably towards the light.

The brown curtains had been an expression of it, so had the plain covers; so, too, were her clothes and the simple frocks she fashioned for Bella. So was her desire for good pronunciation and grammar, her effort at good behaviour, and taste; her attempt to cultivate them in her little sister.

In none of these things was she successful; how could she be? But they were an effort; outward signs of inward aspirations. Perhaps in some scarcely conscious way she recognised them as milestones on her upward path.

Catalogued, her efforts seem small, every-day things; and so they were. And that is just why they were significant. Little achievements are so often big victories in disguise. Hetty's struggle had all been to achieve these victories, to conquer difficulties; poverty, anxiety. To resist the deadening effect of small, squalid neighbourhoods, and to reach something beyond. Not that she had, at this time, any conscious plan to rise out of her surroundings, lifting her father and Bella with her; she hadn't. She'd just a sense of narrow horizons; the vague desire to break through something that was cramping her.

Brown curtains and plain covers are small things in themselves,

but they stood as the symbols of something that was by no means small to Hetty.

For what she had done, she had done alone; unhelped, untaught. What she had achieved, she had achieved through some struggle within her. And—she was only seventeen.

So that when "bits of lace" appeared in the windows, and knick-knacks in every available spare inch of the room, they did more than make the house, in her opinion, less pretty than it had been; they brought to nothing a very definite effort. When the brown curtains were abolished and salmon-pink ones took their place, when the plain covers were taken off and replaced by a floral design in stamped green velvet, when the bright chintz cushions were embellished with frills of cheap silk, and "bits of lace" began to break out anew, in the form of anti-maccassars, useless little mats, ill-devised flouncings, Hetty felt that everything she had worked and striven for, was slipping farther and farther away from her.

She was appalled at the power small things had, to rouse her. The sight of a stupid little lace-trimmed mat in the middle of the tea table could send her heart thumping into her throat with a surge of dumb fury behind it; and yet she would ask herself:

"What's a mat? What can it possibly count? . . ."

But there was never an answer to be found to that question.

She still did all the housework, but there was no longer any crumb of comfort to be found in the doing of it. To dust the hundred and one useless little "knick-knacks" with which the house was now strewn was a job to infuriate her to the very verge of wilfully smashing the hateful things.

Things went on in this way until the middle of November; then the question touched Bella, and friction turned to something stronger. Little skirmishes happened over various things: the lace and ribbons with which Mrs. Carol would decorate Bella's hitherto modest underclothing; the cakes and sweets with which she was eternally stuffing the child, and the way in which she spoilt and petted and showed the little girl off among her friends.

But Mrs. Carol, when Hetty protested, told her to mind her own business and leave things alone that didn't concern her.

It was then that the first hint of an open clash of wills happened.

"Bella does concern me," said Hetty, her heart beating hard. "Bella belongs to mother. She isn't *yours*. You've done what you liked with the house. . . . You . . . you can't do what you like with Bella."

The defiance was rather breathlessly flung; and Mrs. Carol was only contemptuous of it. She said:

"Oh, I can't, can't I? We'll see, that's all."

Hetty felt her heart thump harder than ever, felt words clamouring at her lips.

She caught a breath, became aware that Mrs. Carol had come towards her, and was leaning across the kitchen table, looking into her face.

"Now look here, young Het," she was saying. "I didn't marry your father to have his daughter up and tell me what I got to do and what I haven't got to do. Bella's my step-daughter and I like to see her a credit to me. And I *mean* to see her a credit to me; understand?" She struck the table with a pudgy fist, and her eyes narrowed.

"You an' me," she went on, "you an' me'll get on all right, once you've learned your place, an' it'll be to your advantage to learn *quick*, see? Because I'm not easily roused, but when I *am* . . ."—She struck the table again—"When I am, it'll take more'n you and your father and the whole of Tag Street, to hold me, see? The devil himself couldn't hold me, when I'm once roused. Dowse used to say that, often enough, and no joking either. . . . *'E* couldn't hold me, big man as he was. . . . So what chance d'you think you'd have?"

And Hetty looking into the large fleshy, challenging face, felt herself suddenly small and helpless. Worse still—afraid. She was afraid of this mountainous woman and she knew it; and it was a humiliating, heart-breaking knowledge. She turned away abruptly and went blindly from the room, conscious of the victorious eyes that followed her retreat. And she felt that that moment when she and her stepmother had faced each other across the kitchen table, had brought some sort of dreaded crisis terribly, menacingly near.

When that evening, her father spoke to her about it, the crisis

came nearer still; she felt it as if it came on wings; wide wings that beat around her head. For it was the first time he had spoken of the situation to her.

And when he reproached her for a bad, rude, ungrateful girl, said he didn't know what children were coming to, to stand against their parents like this, she answered sharply,

"She isn't my parent."

And he said, just as sharply,

"Stand against her and you stand against *me!*"

She felt then that if she didn't get out of the house; out of the sights and the sounds of the house, she would bring that dreadful crisis swooping down upon them all, overwhelmingly, smashingly. . . .

So she put on her things and got out, and walked up the dingy street, through the murky November evening, asking herself what was the good of trying. . . . What *was* the good of trying . . . ?

"I try and try, but it's all no use. . . ."

She took a tram over to West Penbury, and all the way the swaying and jolting seemed to beat out a rythm that said:

"I try, and try, and try, and try. . . ."

But when she was set down in West Penbury High Street, the monotonous assertion turned suddenly to a question:

"What have I been trying *for?*"

Thereafter the question stuck to her. What *had* she been trying for: She pondered it as she walked along; it remained at the back of her mind while she looked, rather absently, in at the brightly lighted arcades that fronted some of the bigger shops.

The question pursued her to the entrance of a picture palace, where she stopped to wonder whether she would go in and see what remained of the programme. . . . The posters outside, though, did not thrill her, so she strolled on. . . .

What had she been trying for?

The murkiness of the evening was deepening; the atmosphere began to taste a little. She went into a gold-fronted "Swiss Café" and had a cup of coffee. . . . What had she been trying for?

She didn't know. Something *beyond*. . . . She knew that. But beyond what?

She sipped her coffee, comforted by its warmth, and stared above the cup-rim with thought-troubled eyes.

Oh, beyond all *this* . . . and she made a mental gesture that vaguely included everything around her. . . .

And beyond Mrs. Carol, too. But that was no real answer. Her trying dated back long before the coming of Mrs. Carol. She could not remember a time when she hadn't tried. . . . For what? What had she been trying for? The question was there again.

When she left the light and warmth of the café, she found that the evening's earlier murkiness had turned to brown fog. The lighted arcades had become blurs without detail, even at so short a distance as just across the road; the crowd had thinned to straggling lines of phantoms; shouts from drivers in the roadway; talk, laughter, the sound of footsteps, all seemed to come out of nothing, as the fog wreathed down upon the street, darker and darker. . . . Hetty had had experience of fog before, but never one so sudden and so thick as this one. It came as a shock to her to find, when she was crossing the road towards a tram-stop on the other side, how little sense of direction she had, and how menacing the shapes that loomed so suddenly out of the deep blackish brownness, appeared.

Drivers were leading their horses by the nose and making their way slowly along the curb by the light of torches and lanterns; motor traffic could only move at a snail's pace; the world seemed suddenly to have passed from reality to unreality; from solid substance to phantasy.

A little crowd of people were waiting at the tram-stop, and Hetty joined them, rather glad of their nearness.

The tram took an unconscionable time to get only half way back towards the corner of Blossom Lane, and at that half-way point it stopped; apparently for the night, for minute after minute went by and it did not move; driver and conductor were both grimly resigned and at the "easy;" the loud clanging of bells told the story of trams lining up behind. . . . Voices out

of the darkness told the story of some kind of break down ahead. . . .

The conductor asserted disgustedly that that had fairly *done* it, and advised the passengers to get off and foot it.

Hetty took his advice; found her way to the pavement and started to walk home. She walked cautiously, keeping near the railings, peering fruitlessly into the dark opaqueness in the hope of sighting familiar landmarks.

It was a really bad fog; in the papers next morning it was reported as having broken all records; columns were given to an account of its doings; and it was christened in large headlines "Black Thursday." But to Hetty while she was groping her way through it, it was notable chiefly for stinging her eyes; catching at her throat; tasting horrible, and wreathing its dampness so closely round her that it seemed finally to penetrate her clothes and carry its coldness to her very flesh.

But she went slowly on.

Because she had to go so very slowly, she imagined that she must have progressed much further than she had. She seemed to have fumbled along by the railings for miles.

So that when the friendly shape of a pillar box showed dimly to one side of her, she took it to be the pillar box at the top of Blossom Lane and turned the corner. . . .

The main road had been dark enough, but the less brilliantly-lighted side street was darker still. She seemed to have turned into abysmal night.

She groped along, more slowly than ever. The railings gave way presently to brick wall. That was an encouraging symptom, for there was a space of brick wall on the Blossom Lane side of the grocery store. . . .

The wall ought to turn presently into Tag Street, and just round the turn she ought to find Ruffle's shop door. . . .

The wall *did* turn; and Hetty followed it round. . . .

"I'm all right, now . . ." she was saying to herself, "I'm in Tag Street at last . . ." when, abruptly, the wall ended and with it the pavement. Quite suddenly she stepped out onto nothing; and stumbled headlong forward into the terrifying darkness. . . .

CHAPTER III

She couldn't have told just how long she lay huddled up on the ground, panting, and wondering what had happened, before she recovered sufficiently to put out groping hands and feel around her. The ground felt rough and rubbly, like ground that has been newly dug, and she seemed to be lying crumpled up in a narrow sort of trench. . . . But what did it mean?

She didn't remember anything in the nature of a newly-dug trench up at the top of Tag Street. . . . It couldn't have been dug since she passed here earlier this evening. . . .

And then the truth dawned. . . .

"This can't *be* Tag Street," she told herself. . . .

"I . . . must have turned off wrong somehow . . ."

She started up at this thought, looking round into the impenetrable blackness wide-eyed; her former bewilderment turning suddenly to something very like fear. She scrambled quickly to her feet, climbed out of the trench, and then groping blindly, realised that she had lost touch of that curving wall, the one guide back to the street. . . .

In which direction had she moved in climbing out of the trench? She didn't know.

It was late now, so that the natural darkness of night was added to the darkness of the fog. Wherever she was it was a place without lights. . . . She couldn't see a foot before her. . . .

Where was she? Where *was* she?

If only she could find that wall again . . . !

She turned, her hands searching wildly. . . . Turned back. . . . Nothing. All round her—Nothing.

It seemed as if everything she knew had melted away from around her and given place to this suffocating darkness.

Not usually given to panic, she found herself panic-stricken now and stumbled a quick step forward.

When she collided sharply with some unseen object, she had to press a hand over her mouth to keep herself from crying out aloud. . . .

It wasn't only terror that had caught her. There was all the misery of the last months in this panic of hers.

The fog, her utter confusion, the jar of her fall came as the finishing twist to nerves, strung for weeks past only just below snapping point.

Her hand was shaking when she again groped for whatever it was that had checked her. She found it; felt it over.

It felt like stone; a stone slab . . . rounded at the top. . . . Like a milestone, she decided . . . and tried to bring her panic-stricken mind to think clearly. . . .

There was only one milestone that she could remember; it was on the London road, and marked the six-mile point from Charing Cross. . . .

This wasn't the London Road. . . . This was. . . . Oh, what was it? Where was she . . . ! Her lips and chin began to quiver like the lips and chin of a whimpering child. . . .

She must find her way out of this place!

The ground was awfully rough and seemed scattered with difficulties. . . . Her groping hands passed from one unexplainable object to another. . . . Stones. . . . Stones of all sizes; some rough, some smooth. . . . Rounded, pointed; wide and narrow.

On one, slab-like as the first she had encountered, her searching fingers found deep-cut letters. . . . She stooped down, and shakily traced them out. . . .

S—A—C—R—E—D.

Her heart began to beat hard . . . and her fingers went on more shakily yet.

T—O T—H—E M—E—M—O—R—Y. "Sacred to the Memory . . ." she whispered, and drew back her hands as if the letters stung it.

"It's a graveyard! I'm in a graveyard . . . ! That . . . that was a grave I fell into. . . . A *new* grave. . . . And I'm here alone. . . . Alone. . . .

Caution, reason itself, went scattering at this thought; the superstitious fear of countless ages had her by the throat. . . .

She turned and plunged blindly forward. . . . Tripped over some sort of step, stumbled, and with a cry sank to her knees, her arms frenziedly clinging to a squared pillar of stone. . . .

As she crouched there, her heart beating out sheer panic in her breast, an oblong of light shone suddenly before her. Above her, yet so startlingly near, that it cut a pathway of misty radiance through the darkness, right down to her. She caught a breath and pressed closer to the pillar of stone, as if in the midst of things unexplainable, she clung to it as to her main hope of safety.

She was so attune to terror that it took her a moment to realise that the light came from a window, simply, and was not any sort of mystic beacon. . . .

A figure, black, undetailed, appeared against the light; the window was raised and went up with the protesting shriek of an unwilling sash. . . .

A man's voice said quietly:

"Who is it?"

Hetty's voice came now with difficulty.

"It's me. . . . I don't know where I am. . . . I'm *lost* . . ." and shook away to nothing again.

The voice expressed no surprise, nor asked for any explanation; it said simply:

"Hold on; I'll come down."

The song of angels could not have sounded sweeter in Hetty's ears than the sound of that matter of fact assurance.

She was near a house; near people, near *someone* anyway. . . . A sense of deliverance swept her.

She held on; at that moment she couldn't have done anything else. Her arms were locked around that pillar of stone, as if they meant never again to let go.

There was deathly silence for the space of a minute or two; then the sound of a key turning in a lock, and of a door being pulled open, and, with its opening a second pathway of light, broken by the quick appearance of a silhouetted figure.

The figure coming towards her along that yellow pathway, distorted by the lit-up wreathing of the fog, had now a wild, unreal look. It looked preternaturally tall; its legs appeared

fantastically long; a cloak around its shoulders flapped at its sides, and it was topped by a rough, dishevelled head. . . .

Hetty shrank closer to the stone pillar. . . . The figure didn't quite so clearly suggest deliverance now; fear swelled in her heart again, as it approached, growing larger and larger in the unnatural light. . . .

"Are . . . are you the grave-digger?" she faltered out feeling that she must know something before it came too close. . . .

The figure halted a few paces away from her, and the voice that had spoken from the window said:

"Am I *what?*"

There was such warm humanity in the puzzled question, that things dropped to reality again; the storm of terror in Hetty's breast lulled suddenly. The veils of fear fell from her eyes and the figure seemed to dwindle to the ordinary size and aspect of a man. A young man; perhaps not much more than a boy. . . . Hetty's upraised, searching eyes, caught at these impressions, greedy for the comfort and security they brought.

Something about him satisfied her. She relaxed against the pillar, feeling that there was nothing more to fear; that she was found, saved; she felt limp with relief. . . .

"Are you hurt?" asked the young man.

"No," said Hetty, "at least, not much" and she began explaining with the quivering volubility that comes sometimes when you are on the very verge of thankful tears. . . .

"I thought I was turning into Tag Street and I got into this graveyard and fell into a new grave and couldn't find my way out again" she said, and broke off to catch a sharp breath, trying to steady her shaking lips.

"Graveyard?" said the young man, puzzled again. "This isn't a graveyard."

"But I fell into an open grave," insisted Hetty.

"You couldn't have done," he said.

"But I *did,*" said Hetty, and felt curiously steadied up by the argument.

"There aren't any graves here. This is Jones' work-yard. I'm Ben Jones," the young man explained concisely. "We make all these headstones and things."

Hetty was silent a moment; looking up at him.

"What, used you to have that place up by West Penbury Station?"

"Yes, we're masons; monumental masons."

"Oh," she said, briefly, a trifle flatly, with the flatness that comes when you find that you have been through a storm of emotion for nothing.

But her fright had been a very bad one. It had worked such positive pictures in her imagination, that she could not altogether shake off her belief in them. . . .

"Well, I only know that I fell . . ." she began.

"Oh," he broke in, the mystery clearing. "That must have been where the workmen are digging up the drains! We've not long moved into this place and we're all upside down. . . . I say, you're awfuly cold. . . ."

"Not so very," said Hetty.

"But you are all shaking," declared Ben Jones, which wasn't very tactful of him.

"Well, I'm *frightened*. You'd be frightened if you thought you were in a graveyard at this time of night in the pitch dark and all by yourself . . ." she answered with a touch of spirit.

"You bet I would," he agreed encouragingly.

"And if you'd been falling about over things and not able to *see*. It's . . . it's just as bad to *think* you've fallen into a grave . . . even if it *is* only . . . where they're d—digging up the—drains. . . ." She finished on a quiver.

"It's enough to scare anyone stiff," he said; and added:

"Is it Tag Street you want to get to?"

"Yes; that's where I live."

"Well, look here, would you like to come in and warm up a bit? Then I'll take you home."

Her grey eyes, like big, tired stars, looked up full into his.

"You're . . . awfully kind" she said, gratefully.

"Come on, then," was all he said; but after a second's hesitation he added slowly:

"D'you know, it gave me quite a queer feeling when I looked out of the window and saw you. . . . I thought you were Rock of Ages come to life. . . ."

"Thought I was what?"

"Well, we've got a broken old figure of a girl holding to a cross and when I saw you move. . . ."

But Hetty was not listening further. She had tilted back her head quickly, and was looking up the acute height of the stone pillar. . . .

Ben Jones looked up too and above them, haloed in the deep gold of the illumined fog, stretched the wide, serene arms of the eternal symbol of salvation. . . .

For a moment they remained motionless, then Ben Jones lowered his eyes until they rested upon Hetty's white, strained face, and saw that big, slow tears, were on her cheeks.

He took her, presently, into the house through the back door.

The kitchen, he suggested, was, at the moment, the most hospitable room in the house, as a fire was still burning there. So to the kitchen they repaired.

It was a small kitchen and not very tidy. Hetty, standing in the middle of it, while Ben Jones pushed up a big wooden arm chair, looked a very forlorn little figure. She was shivering more than ever, because of the sudden warmth; her coat was rumpled, her hands earthy. Her hat was several degrees out of its proper angle, and her dusky hair was hanging in damp straggles over her eyes. . . .

She had to make an effort to keep the chattering of her teeth from becoming audible.

Ben Jones invited her to the big armchair, and she sat down gratefully. He stirred the fire to a good blaze and moved away.

She spread her hands to the fire, put her feet on the fender, and, tired out, gave herself up to the comfort of it. The warmth was unspeakably good, but for a moment it made her giddy; for a moment the little kitchen threatened to spin. . . . She closed her eyes and told herself resolutely that it shouldn't; that she wouldn't let it; and it didn't. When she looked round again, the little kitchen was stationary, and steady. . . . The cold was gradually leaving her chilled body, and, she found, a good deal of the pain had left her poor wounded spirit. A comfortable glow was spreading through her. . . .

Ben Jones, she saw then, was setting a small saucepan on the gas stove, which was to one side, behind her.

He caught her look.

"Hot milk," he explained briefly, and went on attending to it.

She thanked him, and remained turned in her chair, looking at him.

He presented a rather queer figure, from the half-laced boots on his feet, to the lank, untidy hair tumbling over his forehead. He had evidently pulled on an assortment of clothes in a hurry, for although his legs were discreetly attired in grey tweed trousers, at his throat above the cloak which he kept wrapped round him, Hetty saw the escaping collar of a pajama coat.

Certainly his get-up was not one to recommend him in ordinary circumstances, but now, it spoke to Hetty of the haste with which he had come to her rescue, and she was grateful for it.

There was too, a niceness in his eyes,—hazel eyes she thought they were but could not be sure—and a pleasant soberness around his lips.

She could not quite decide upon how old he was. He was tall—"long," Hetty called it to herself—and angular; a touch coltish, even, in his movements. He had a look of not having yet stopped growing. At that point in her observation of him, Hetty decided that he couldn't be more than seventeen, or eighteen. Yet, on considering his face again, there was something in it that made her re-decide quickly that he must be much older than that. . . .

He did not appear to be too embarrassed by his unconventional attire. Perhaps he regarded it as the best he had been able to do in a moment of stress and therefore privileged to go unnoticed.

Her eyes left him and went to his surroundings. . . . The kitchen wasn't so much untidy, as haphazard. The lino was swept but not polished; plates were stacked on the dresser; not set out in rows upon the shelves; cups also, were standing, not hanging. There was no cloth on the table, but several books, which hadn't at all the look of being cook-books. There was a pile of newspapers in one corner; a tool box in another; and through the open larder door, Hetty saw, not the neat rows of white and blue jars, marked Flour, or Rice, or Sugar as the case might be, such as were to be found in her larder, but a higgledy-piggledy collection of things in paper bags, just as they'd come from the shops. . . .

Over the window was a thick green curtain; only one; which hooked across from one side to the other by means of rings on the curtain and hooks over the window. So that when it was pulled aside during the day it must be all collected together on one side only. . . . An adequate, but lop-sided arrangement. . . . And to the curtain were pinned two big sheets of drawing paper upon one of which was drawn out in ornamental letters.

"The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.

Blessed. . . ."

She couldn't see any more, because the paper was so curled up from the bottom edge. . . . And on the other, was

"God is Love. . . ."

Through all this, it took some time for any definite impression to penetrate, but Hetty, looking round, had a feeling that it all meant something; all said something. . . .

It came to her quite suddenly, when it did come, and it was simply this: that there was no woman in the Jones' family.

Her eyes went back quickly to the odd figure of Ben at the stove, and a new sympathy stirred in her heart. . . . He was motherless, too . . . the starry eyes were wonderfuly softened as she looked at him.

Then they went again to that corner of striped flannel collar, protruding above the cloak at his throat; and:

"Were you in bed when I cried out?" she asked suddenly.

He turned from the stove, but still holding the saucepan at a cautious height above the gas jet.

"Yes, I was," he answered. "But I'd only been in about twenty minutes. I was late to-night."

"I'm awfully sorry," she apologised.

"Why, it's nothing. . . . I'm glad I woke up. . . ."

"Oh, you were asleep too! What a shame. . . ."

"No, honestly," he protested, sincerely.

"I waited in a tram ever so long, hoping it'ud be able to go on, but it couldn't. . . . So I got out and tried to walk back. . . . I didn't think I *could* get lost around here, even if it was inky black."

"Things seem so different in a fog. And this one's specially bad."

"You seem to forget which way you are facing."

"Yes; unless you keep hold of something to guide you."

She nodded.

"That's just what I didn't do! When I fell into the . . . into the . . . you know, where you said they're digging up the drain. . . ." She coloured, because safe in this warm, lighted kitchen, in the care of this nice-eyed youth, her horror of the "newly-dug grave" seemed a touch foolish, and she almost looked for him to laugh at her, but he didn't; he only nodded. So she went on quickly: "Well when I scrambled *out* again, I quite forgot to keep a touch on the wall. . . . And I couldn't find it again, no matter how I tried. . . ."

"Father must have forgotten to shut the yard gates. Father's often absent-minded about those things . . ." he said and pouring the heated milk into a cup, he brought it to her. . . .

She took it, looking up at him.

"You're . . . you're awfully kind," she said as she had said before; a smile of shy friendliness on her lips.

"I . . . can't see how I ever took you for anything so . . . so gruesome as a grave digger."

He did not answer the smile; he looked down at her, thoughtfully.

"I do the stones and inscriptions," he said seriously, after a moment. "I suppose that's gruesome too?"

She blushed suddenly, wondering whether she had not almost insulted his work, and whether he felt the insult. . . . And after he had been so good to her. . . .! How stupid of her!

She bent her head to the cup of milk and burnt her mouth with an incautious sip. . . . Then became conscious that he was still standing near her, evidently waiting for her answer.

She looked up and stammered, apologetically:

"I can't help thinking it's . . . a bit . . . *gloomy;* I can't really."

"You get used to it," said Ben, and Hetty saw now that he didn't look at all offended. "Father's always been in the business."

"I see," said Hetty politely, and applied herself to the milk again.

"Have a biscuit?" he suggested and reached up for the biscuit

tin on the mantelpiece. But when he'd picked it up, he shook it suspiciously, looking concerned; opened it and said:

"Oh I say, there aren't any. I'm awfully sorry."

His concern was so genuine, and so boyish, that she almost laughed. But the lack of biscuits seemed somehow to match the haphazard arrangement of the kitchen, and that, she felt, was so much a thing *not* to be laughed at, that, instead she said very earnestly:

"I really didn't want anything to eat. The milk is fine, and I'm getting so lovely and warm!"

He replaced the tin, then looked at her again, and now he laughed slightly, as if he, too, were offering a shy friendship.

So she laughed then and everything was easier.

Out of a silence she asked suddenly:

"Do you like making tombstones?"

And after a pause he answered slowly:

"I don't know about *liking* it, exactly."

Then he glanced down at his clothes again, and said:

"I suppose it was father's cloak that looked odd, and gruesome. I grabbed the first thing that came handy as I passed the coat rack. . . . I'll go and dress and then we'll find Tag Street."

"Oh, no," she protested quickly. "You mustn't bother. . . . I'm sure I can find my way now."

"I don't see what makes you think that," he said argumentatively, "considering the mess you got into just now."

"Yes, but I know where I am now . . . and besides the fog may have lifted . . ."

"D'you know what time it is?" he broke in.

Her glance followed his towards the clock over the fireplace and she saw that it was well past eleven. . . .

"So finish the milk and I'll be back in a minute," he said conclusively.

She protested no further. He left her and she drank the last of the milk and settled her hair and her hat preparatory to going out again.

When Ben Jones returned, his appearance was a good deal different from what it had been. The lank disorder of his hair had given place to an equally lank smoothness; an overcoat had replaced the cloak; and as it was unbuttoned, she saw that a

tweed coat and waistcoat had taken the place of the pajama jacket. His boots were fully laced and a woollen muffler was round his neck. He carried a soft felt hat in his hand and the cloak he had been wearing, over his arm.

"I thought you'd better wear this," he said, offering the cloak. "You'll need something, going out of the warmth. . . ."

She stood up.

"I'd be glad of it," she said, gratefully and let him put it round her shoulders.

And:

"Oh," she added, as she buttoned the collar under her chin. "My name is Carol. I quite forgot I hadn't told you. . . . Hetty Carol. . . ."

"I heard that name the other day," he answered. . . . "But I don't remember. . . ."

"Hetty Carol?" she asked quickly, "or just Carol?"

"Just Carol; about somebody marrying a man called Carol. . . ."

She nodded quickly.

"That's right," she said. "That's my dad. . . ."

"Was it Mrs. Dowse? Wife of the man that used to keep the pub?" he went on.

"*Widow* of him," she corrected.

"And she's your . . ." he began.

"Step-mother," she put in quickly. "Yes, she is. . . ."

They stood looking at each other. He seemed rather taken aback; incredulous almost.

"I heard someone telling dad she'd married a man called Carol. . . . But . . ." he broke off, then added, slowly:

"I shouldn't have thought that you and she were . . . relations."

"We *aren't,*" she flashed back, and caught a breath. "At least . . .only *steps* . . . That doesn't make you proper relatives . . . does it?"

"No," he said, in the same slow way.

"Do you know her?" she asked.

"I can't say I exactly *know* her. . . . But I did the stone for Dowse, and she came and told me what she wanted."

"You did?" she asked, startled.

"Yes; I jabbed a chisel into my hand, over it, so I remember it."

He spread his left hand, and she looked down and saw the white ridge of a scar at the base of the first finger.

"That was a bad cut," she said, "to leave a mark like that." But she was not really thinking of the cut.

"A chisel going full tilt, makes a nasty jab," he said.

She looked up again.

"But how queer, though, isn't it?" she said rather breathlessly. "I mean that you should have done his stone. . . ."

"Well, I don't know. We're cheaper than Grayleys and they're about the only other masons round about here. . . ."

"Oh, I didn't mean because of that!" she cried.

"She had an awful lot of heart-break put on the stone," he said presently.

"Oh, she *would,*" broke out Hetty. "She *would;* and then not three months later she goes and marries . . . dad. . . ." She caught a breath and turned away abruptly.

She felt a sudden impulse to tell him everything; just what Mrs. Dowse had meant to her; just how afraid she was for Bella . . . just all that her heart was so aching with. . . . She didn't know where the impulse came from; he was practically a stranger to her. . . . She did not usually tell things . . . but she wanted to now. . . .

And perhaps she might have yielded to the impulse if he hadn't broken in upon her thoughts by saying:

"I don't believe there's anything that tells a person's character like an epitaph."

"It's mostly too good to be true," said Hetty sombrely, her voice rather muffled.

"I didn't mean the person it's written *about,*" he said naïvely.

She faced him again quickly.

"Then you know . . . you know what *she* is . . ." she said.

"I bet I do," he answered, simply.

And she felt suddenly more peaceful. She had wanted to tell everything, and it had been told. . . . Without many words, without any details; none the less, in essence, it had been told,

and in essence, he had understood. . . . At the moment, that was enough. . . .

When they started out, they found that the fog had thinned slightly, and they were able to find Tag Street without misadventure.

That was how friendship came to Hetty; in the thick of a real November fog, at the base of a cross in the work yard of a monumental mason. And it was the very best thing that could possibly have come to her, because, in making the first, interesting discoveries that are to be made in friendship, the tension of the home situation was relaxed.

She had someone to talk things over with, now, for Ben Jones had a perfect genius for listening. It was surprising how rapidly their friendship developed. Within the short space of a few weeks they reached the stage when there seemed to be nothing that they couldn't discuss. They discussed, argued, disagreed, but never quarrelled.

"It's funny," she used to say to him, "us being such friends. I've never been friends with anyone before and there's lots of people I've known for years and years. . . ."

And,

"Doesn't seem to me *time* makes much odds," he would answer. "If you're friends with anyone, you're friends; that's all there is to it."

That certainly seemed to be all there was to this friendship; it seemed to have happened, ready-made.

Now when home life was more than usually difficult; when Hetty had that feeling that the sights and sounds of No. 39 were unendurable, when that terrible storm rose in her breast and threatened to rend her, when the crisis beat its black wings too menacingly near, she went round to Ben's, and sitting on an upturned box in the ramshackle little work shed, while he chipped away at his inscriptions or texts she would talk it all out to him. And he gave her the comfort of his boyish sympathy and the benefit of his nineteen years old philosophy.

The progress of Hetty's home affairs were recorded between them in that little shed.

They made a rather curious picture; the thoughtful-faced

youth in his overalls, blue glasses over his eyes, plodding, with faithful intentness, at his job; and the wistful-eyed girl, unhappy, restless; everything that had ever been her job messed up beyond hope of recovery. He, calm and measured as if the present moment were the only point of time that mattered; she, tossed between memories of the past, and dread of the future; the present moment only the agonising reality that kept her locked between the two.

And before them a yard so full of tombstones, crosses, grave-borders; carved wreaths beneath big bubbles of glass, rough-hewn blocks of marble; granite, and battered statuary that it looked less like the workyard of a monumental mason, than like a desecrated burial ground.

Even "Rock of Ages" had lost her nose, some fingers and an entire fore-arm; beside minor damages to drapery. And each week the litter seemed to grow worse; something was added to it. . . .

Hetty asked Ben about it one day.

"Why," she asked, "do you keep on buying such a lot of old stone and stuff. . . . You never seem to use it?"

And he told her.

"Father can't resist a bargain," he said. "If he sees a yard full of stone going cheap, he has to have it."

"But, Ben, you'll never use it," she protested.

He had a curiously intent way of working; a single purposed way, as if in all the world nothing were quite as important as the work he happened to be engaged upon at the moment, and it was a minute before he answered; for, evidently, he had reached a delicate point in the rounding of some letter for he was keeping the tap of mallet upon chisel, very dainty and light.

When the crisis was over, he only said:

"Never."

"How queer. Does he plan ever to do anything with it all?"

"Oh, yes, he *plans*. . . ."

"But never does it?"

"No."

"So you do practically all the work of Jones & Son?"

"Oh, well, there's nothing in that. Someone's got to do it."

"I couldn't stick it, I'd go mad. Sitting and chipping out texts all day. . . . Why don't you get out and do something else?"

"What?"

"Oh, I don't know. Anything. . . ."

Another delicate point in his operations kept his attention and held it for some moments. Then he said:

"Perhaps I will, some day."

"I don't suppose you will. You'll just go on and on, chipping stones all the days of your life. You're such an old plodder, Ben."

He only said:

"Oh, well," and went on with his work.

There were times when Ben seemed to Hetty to be very slow, immovable.

Times too, when he exasperated her badly, he was so deadly reasonable. But the very qualities in him that exasperated her, were just the qualities that made her turn to him as to a dependable strength; with perfect confidence.

He was, as she had guessed, motherless; his mother had died in giving him life; and there was that curious, scarcely definable apartness about him that sometimes characterises those who have only ever known a father . . . such a curious father, too. Hetty couldn't understand old man Jones.

He was tall and bent, with a straggling white beard, rather wild, white hair, and pale, piercing eyes.

Hetty had been surprised at Ben's prosaic attitude towards the chilly—if necessary—craft that was his trade. But she could not understand old man Jones' attitude, for he seemed positvely to love tombstones. He stroked them and patted them and gloated over them; and he was always talking of the mighty mausoleums he meant to build some day.

Then he used to show Hetty his plans; plans for great monumental tombs; all drawn out with the most beautiful and elaborate detail.

He would explain them to her, but his explanations were apt to wander and to leave Hetty no wiser than she had been.

And one day when he was showing her his pet plans of a very kingly tomb, she said:

"It seems almost too . . . elaborate . . . and . . . and beautiful to have built for you when you're *dead*." And he got quite fired; rolled up the plans and put them away and turned on her and drew himself up so that he looked hugely tall and gaunt in the little kitchen, and said:

"That tomb wasn't designed for a dead body. . . . It's a temple to a risen soul. . . ."

So, after that, she never did anything but admire the plans.

Of course she wasn't allowed to have her friendship in peace. Ben had to be introduced into the family circle at No. 39 and Mrs. Carol was soon referring to him, archly and with meaning, as "Somebody."

"I saw *somebody* in the High Street this afternoon," she would say, during supper, and she would look at Hetty and:

"He's a dear boy, I'm shore, even if 'e *'as* been measured out by the yard . . ." and she would jab Herbert in the ribs and go off into husky shrieks of laughter.

Or:

"Look at the fine colour young Het's got. . . . Looks as if *somebody's* been passin' along this way. . . ."

And in spite of the gurgling laughter there was always a touch of malice in the fun.

"Funny how she can make a torment of every blessed thing," Hetty used to think. "Even Ben. . . ." But the question took a deeper turn when Bella started.

"I can't see what you can see in that Ben," she said, during one of the rare evenings when they were alone together. "The great lank!" and she tossed her curls, contemptuously.

"He's always very nice to *you,* anyway," Hetty answered defensively.

"Huh, boys are always nice to me."

"Belle . . . that sounds horrid. . . ." As Bella had said it, it *did* sound horrid and Hetty was taken aback.

"Well, they *are.* And you can't talk anyway. . . . Ben's only a pick-up, after all. You weren't properly introduced."

"You've heard Mrs. Carol say that!" cried Hetty indignantly.

"Well, it's true. Are you going to marry Ben, Hetty?"

"Of course not! Don't talk such rubbish."

"I'm glad you've got that much sense. You wouldn't get *me* to marry Ben. Not were it ever so!"

And behind all that the little girl said Hetty saw Mrs. Carol. And she was frightened anew, for she saw something that she hadn't seen before. That Bella was being really influenced by Mrs. Carol. . . . She awoke, almost suddenly, to a difference in the child and there was panic in her voice when she went to the stone-yard and made her next report to Ben. . . .

"Ben, she's getting the kid away from me, now!"

He pushed the dark glasses to his forehead and looked up at that.

"Surely not. The kid's too fond of you to let it happen."

"Oh, it's who can *give* most, with children!" said Hetty, bitterly.

"Not all children," argued Ben.

"Well, that doesn't make it any better for me."

"No, of course not." And Ben looked thoughtfully round the yard; at the crosses and wreaths; at the litter of unused stuff; at the stone maiden, clinging with what was left of her to the cross; at all the hopeless dilapidation of it. Then back again at Hetty; and:

"If it wasn't for father," he said, slowly, "we could marry and get away from it. . . . Only you know what father is. It's as much as I can do to keep things held together as it is. . . ."

He broke off, halted by her expression.

"*We* could marry?" she said, voice and eyes incredulous.

He nodded.

"You and me?" she added, as if believing were difficult.

"Yes."

She stared at him a moment; then:

"But you're only a boy."

"I'm nineteen; that's two years more than you," he answered stoutly.

"It may be; but I'm ages and ages older than you."

The vehement exaggeration held a seed of truth. Men are sometimes boys; but girls are never anything but women.

"There's heaps of things I know that you don't," she went on.

"And heaps of things I've thought about and . . . felt . . . that you never have."

"How can you tell that?" he demanded.

"Oh, I can, that's all." But she could not explain. She only knew that Ben never seemed to want anything. He seemed to be content to look at his own life and the lives of those around him, with calm, unexcitable eyes.

Even now, while he was proposing to her, he did not seem really to want particularly to marry her. He had said it rather as he might have said, "If I'd another sixpence we could go to the pictures."

Perhaps the thought struck her, because there came a moment when she looked as if she might laugh at him; but she didn't. There was something about Ben that she never could quite laugh at. He was too true and sound. He brought the present question to actuality now.

"We can't marry, anyway, we've no money," he said.

"It's enough for *dad* to go and do it . . ." answered Hetty. "Let alone *us*. . . ."

He nodded.

"Quite enough," he replied.

She stood looking out over the symbols of the departed, with thoughtful eyes, and for the moment, home troubles were forgotten and it was the fact that Ben had suggested that she might marry him, that was uppermost in her mind. Although it bore few of the marks of a regular proposal, and although she had scarcely recognised it as a proposal, yet it *was* the first time that anything as near to a proposal had happened to her. . . . And it brought something new to the aspect of things.

"Ben," she began and paused; silence held for a moment.

"Ben," she said again, in a sudden quick whisper, and the grey eyes were more than ever like stars shining through clouds, for a breeze had whipped the dusky hair across her face.

"Ben, you don't really want to marry me, do you?"

He looked at her quickly, then across the shabby yard; and then suddenly pulled the dark glasses down over his eyes again.

A face without eyes is as enigmatic as a house without windows; there may be anything or nothing behind the blankness.

"I wouldn't mind," he said slowly.

And silence fell again.

"Oh!" she cried, flushing. . . .

Presently he said:

"Stay to tea, Hetty?" and things seemed to shrivel down to normal again between them.

CHAPTER IV

When the black-winged crisis did swoop, it swooped suddenly; unexpectedly; into a period of comparative calm.

Mrs. Carol had "company," on New Year's Eve, to see the new year in. For the first few times she had entertained, Hetty had been present, but being wholly unused to the cards, drinks, much joking, and shrieks of laughter, that were the order of the evening, she had been so hopelessly out of it, that Mrs. Carol felt she was nothing but an irritation—a "skellington at the feast," as she put it. So Hetty usually went out when Mrs. Carol had company.

She waited to arrange the refreshments for the party and to see that everything was right as could be. She saw Bella safely into bed, tucked her up, kissed her and promised to wake her up in good time to hear the new year bells ring out.

Then she went out into the fine cold, evening.

Things had seemed rather better lately; she felt that she had herself in better control; she was happier than she had been for some time and walked briskly and with enjoyment.

Thinking of a hundred things, she walked over to West Penbury and back.

It was past ten when she turned into Tag Street again.

Half way along she became aware that Mrs. Carol's party was in full swing, for the hilarious screams of laughter reached her already. . . .

She pushed open the squeaky little gate and let herself in with her key.

A babel of voices sounded from the drawing room, and she went quietly past the door and made for the stairs. Three stairs up she halted suddenly, and turned back, listening.

Above the deep voices of the men, above the shrill laughter of the women, there sounded the high, excited treble of a child. . . .

Bella's laugh.

But she had left Bella in bed. . . .

Hetty stood for a moment, something new in her eyes and a sudden storm beating in her heart, so fierce, that it had the power to shake her. . . .

Then she ran quickly down again and flung open the drawing-room door.

Through an atmosphere blue with smoke and redolent of whiskey, she saw the big, flushed face of Mrs. Carol, the thin, excited face of her father, and the faces of some dozen other men and women. Cards lay on the table, bottles stood on the floor, glasses were upon anything that would hold them, and in the middle of a room that looked like a fourth-rate bar-parlour, Bella was dancing.

Bella, in a frock like the off-spring of Mrs. Carol's blue silk wrapper; her hair frizzed out into edgy crinkles, and caught up with huge bows and brilliant set slides.

She was capering about in the middle of the room, kicking up her pert little heels,—flinging up saucy little knees, while the party sat round singing, laughing, applauding and beating out the rhythm with their hands.

Her childish cheeks were flushed; her blue eyes very bright. She was flinging herself into the spirit of the evening with all of a child's abandon. In imitation of something she had seen at the cinema, she finished her performance by blowing kisses all round.

A youngish man with small eyes and prominent teeth held out both arms, a half-filled glass in one hand, and cried out:

"Crikey! But ain't she the golden-haired baby doll! Come an' give us a kiss, darlin.' Come an' kiss your Uncle Jimmy!"

And Bella, elated with success, was tripping and pirouetting up to him when a hand caught her and pulled her back, and Hetty, with that something new turned to something quite terrible in her eyes, stood facing the young man.

And then she brought the black-wings swooping down upon them all. . . .

"Get out of this house," she said, in a low voice. And a sudden hush fell upon the room.

Hetty's eyes travelled round the semi-circle of faces gone suddenly blank with astonishment.

"Get out of this house *all* of you!" she added, in that same tense, low voice.

There was some quality in her tone, something in her look, that made the guests begin to obey. Some of them had risen, when Mrs. Carol, recovering from her surprise like one recovering from an apoplexy, lifted her bulky person from her chair and faced Hetty with eyes as terrible, in their particular way, as Hetty's own. She was quivering from head to foot with temper.

"What's that you're sayin'?" she demanded.

Hetty met her squarely.

"I'm telling these people to go," she answered.

Mrs. Carol came a step nearer.

"And who are you to come bargin' in and orderin' my guests out of the house? Who are you, I say? Answer me that."

"The answer's in Bella," cried Hetty thrusting the child a little forward. "What have you done to her? What *have* you done to her? Just look at her! How could you let her! How *could* you!"

Hetty was quivering, too. Her slight figure, taut and straight, staunchly opposing the mountainous proportions of Mrs. Carol.

"Here, we don't want any words. We aren't ones for any unpleasantness. We'll go," said "Uncle Jimmy" in a conciliatory way, but Mrs. Carol swung round on him.

"You stay right where you are, and we'll have this thing out once and for all. If this young Het thinks she can come the boss over me, I'll just show her as she's mistaken." She swung back again, ugly with rage.

"How dare you!" she nearly screamed. "How dare you! Mayn't I do as I like with me own step-daughter? Mayn't I give her a little bit of fun? Keep her like a charity brat, you do! Any one 'ud think we was down to our last penny to clap eyes on that kid. An' you talk to me like that! Me, what's lifted you all out o' the gutter, so to say, with the little bit o' money what I got. Who runs this house, I'd like to know? I do; bear that in mind! Bear that in mind *well*, my girl. It'll pay you to. . . ." She paused for breath, but before Hetty could speak was off again.

The torrent of words fell so fast that Hetty didn't hear half of what the infuriated woman said.

"You think you can stand against *me,* do you? . . *Do* you? Well, if it's a question of you or me, ask all *them* who they'll have." She made a sweping gesture with a fat hand round the semi-circle of guests. . . .

"All right, then, it *is* a question of you or me," said Hetty defiantly.

"Is it! Is it, my girl? We'll see. Ask your father. Ask the kid. Just *ask* 'em. That's all. . . ."

The triumph in Mrs. Carol's face was even more ugly than the rage.

There was a murmur from the company. Herbert Carol put in a feeble, protesting:

"Lou . . . Hetty . . . Lou . . ."

But Mrs. Carol had said that when she was aroused there was no holding her, and she was proving it now. . . . Shaking from head to foot, she gave vent to the volcano of her temper, pouring the molten lava of her wrath down upon Hetty.

Hetty was shaken by it too, but the storm that was raging in her heart was a new storm. It had in it, every precious picture that her memory held of her mother; it had in it all the fidelity with which she had striven to do her best for Bella; every effort she had ever made; every blind groping feeling she had ever felt . . . and these are strong elements. She might have stood against her fear of Mrs. Carol; matched her storm to the volcano, and won. . . . But she could not stand against the wholly unreckoned-on thing that happened now.

During a lull in the infuriated screaming of Mrs. Carol Bella jerked her arm out of Hetty's hand, and stamped an angry, childish foot.

"You're always spoiling my fun, Hetty. What you always got to come and spoil my fun for?" she cried out. That was all, but Hetty's posture of courage crumpled suddenly. She fell back a step, looking down at the little angry bundle of cheap finery that Bella had become.

"Fun?" she cried in a queer, broken voice. "*I* spoil your fun? Oh, Bella!"

Caesar's reproach to Brutus was not wrung from a heart more bitterly hurt. She was beaten, then, but it was Bella who had beaten her; not Mrs. Carol.

She covered her face with her hands; forgetful of everything and everyone; just feeling utterly crushed. . . .

"Perhaps this'll learn you who's who in this house," said Mrs. Carol. "Perhaps this'll learn you, my fine lady.

"You're nothing but a nasty ungrateful girl! A serpent what I've nursed in my bosom. And if you think I'm going to keep you in luxury, eatin' your head off and playin' the lady at my expense you're mistaken. *You,* to tell my friends as they was to get out! You indeed! There's a tit-for-tat to that idea, my girl, and it's you as can do the getting out. Bear that in mind, and you can do it pretty quick, what's more. You can do it now. D'you hear me. You can do it now!"

"Lou! Lou!" said Mr. Carol.

His "bit of fun" was turning to a bit of something else this evening.

Mrs. Carol swung heavily round on him.

"You can keep your 'ead shut! You're nothing but a mean worm, anyway, leavin' me to fight me own battles, me, a pore weak woman. . . ." Tears threatened, but didn't actually fall, and the tirade went on. Hetty lifted a white drawn face.

"Oh, all right, I'll go!" she said suddenly. "For mercy's sake, just be quiet, I'll go." And she turned and half ran from the room.

Her father called after her:

"Hetty, don't be silly! She doesn't mean it. . . . You've taken it all wrong! . . ."

"Oh, don't she mean it!" put in Mrs. Carol.

"But, Lou. . . . Where'll she go . . .? Hetty, you've no where to go. . . ." cried out Mr. Carol following Hetty into the hall.

"She'll find some place, that's what," said Mrs. Carol, coming out, pushing past her insignificant husband, and stretching out a threatening hand towards Hetty. But Hetty eluded her, and slipped into the scullery.

"All right, I'll find some place. . . . I don't care, anyway," she said a little wildly. "Everything's gone. . . . There's nothing left. . . . Not a thing. . . . I . . . I can't do any more. . . . So I'll find some place. . . ."

Mrs. Carol drove her through the narrow scullery, while Herbert tried to hold the infuriated woman back.

She was of the type that throws things when enraged. She caught up the first thing that came handy—a milk jug standing on the top of the copper—and flung it blindly in Hetty's direction. Hetty ducked and the jug broke over her head against the back door.

Hetty escaped out into the back garden, slamming the door behind her.

She stood still, a few yards from the house, breathing fast; her pulses racing. From the scullery came the sounds of uplifted voices; her father's, halting and afraid; Mrs. Carol's, sharp with a note of hysteria; and beyond them the murmur of several others. . . .

The door was suddenly flung wide and: "I'll get her, the hussey, and put her out with me own hands," came Mrs. Carol's voice screamingly.

Hetty shrank into the darkness round the end of the coal shed, which jutted out from the wall.

A chorus of voices reached her. "To tell my friends as they could clear out. . . . Come 'ere, you Hetty, an I'll put you outside the door with me own 'ands!"

Mrs. Carol's screaming voice still sustained the solo part.

"Lou . . . come in. . . . She's gone! Lou, what 'av you done!" Mr. Carol's weak whimper followed thinly.

"Gone?" echoed Mrs. Carol. "Gone? And a good riddance too; that's what I says . . .! But she ain't gone; she's laying low somewhere out here, and'll come snivelling back when she's had enough of it. . . . You'll see. . . . *You're* nothing but a little rat anyway, lettin' her talk to me the way she did, before me frien's an' all."

The tone of the chorus now became consolatory.

"There . . . don't take on. . . ." "After all you've done. . . " The more you do the more you *may,* in this world. . . ." "But *you* ain't to blame. . . . Just a little bit of innercent fun. . . ."

Mrs. Carol melted to maudlin tears and was evidently supported into the house again by her friends, for Hetty heard her voice, receding.

"Not a thing have I denied her. . . . Not a thing. . . . Just like me own, she' bin. . . . An' then to turn on me like this. . . . Is it gratitude. . . .? I ask you. . . .?"

With the sound of the shutting of the door, the voices muddled away to a murmur.

Hetty remained crouching down against the wall listening until there was nothing but the knocking of her heart to listen to.

When things had quieted down in the house, she went quietly out into the street through the side garden door.

She had only one thought; to get to Ben. In a desert of misery, the thought of Ben was the one oasis.

She half walked and half ran; and on reaching the Jones' yard, saw Ben himself, just shutting the gate.

She called to him quietly, and he looked out into the street saying, surprised:

"Hullo, Hetty . . ."

She stood before him, lit by the dim glow of a distant street-lamp, her face working, trying awfully hard not to give way to the tears that sprang at the sound of his friendly voice . . .

"Father had left the gate open again . . ." he added.

"Ben," she broke out shakily. "She's turned me out . . . I haven't got a home any more. She's turned me out . . . What am I to do . . .?"

He stood for the fraction of a moment looking at her, then stretched out a quick hand and pulled her in through the gate . . .

And there in the darkness of the yard it was just a little overwrought girl, who gave herself to the haven of his boyish arms, weeping her heart out against his sleeve.

With the understanding that was so far in advance of his nineteen years, he just held her tight, and let her weep, and did not speak until her weeping was spent.

Then he said slowly out into the darkness, over her head:

"I suppose that things have reached a crisis."

That was so precisely the sort of thing that Ben would suppose, that it brought Hetty out of her emotion and out of his arms, in a moment.

"Of course they have!" she cried.

"Well, tell me about it."

And out tumbled the whole story.

"I see," he said gravely, when she had finished. "We've got to think a bit. The thing to do in a crisis is to act promptly . . ."

"Yes but how? What can I do?"

"That's just what we've got to think out." And he went on as if he were thinking it all out aloud.

"It's no good going back while feeling runs high."

"I wouldn't go back for anything on earth!" she cried vehemently.

"No, and it wouldn't do any good for me to go and talk to her now. She wouldn't listen. It would only do more harm than good."

"Yes. Oh, she's far past listening to anything."

"So you've got to let her feeling cool down a bit. If I had a mother, you could stay here; as it is, it would only give Mrs. Carol the chance to say things; so that's no good . . ."

His way of quite calmly discussing the question gave her a sense of security, even while she chafed at the slowness of it.

"Well?" she said. "What *is* any good?"

"The only perfectly good thing I can think of at this moment is, Sally," he answered.

"Who's Sally?"

"A friend of mine. Come along, I'll take you to her."

He pulled her hand through his arm and headed out into the street again.

"But Ben . . ." began Hetty, protestingly.

"Oh that's all right," he interrupted. "Sally'll understand."

"But I can't land on her at this time of night."

"Yes you can; Sally's like that."

They were walking quickly towards the main street, and, a good deal bewildered, Hetty let Ben take her.

"Where does she live?" she asked presently.

"D'you know Apple Orchard Road?"

"Yes, it's an awful rough place."

"Well, it's just before you get there. You don't have to worry."

He spoke with such perfectly final confidence that a lot of obvious questions died before they reached her lips, and they went on silently again until Ben halted before the side door of a

small oilshop on a corner. He looked up at the windows, but no light showed in any of them.

"We'll have to ring 'em up," he said, and reached for the bell.

But before he could ring, the door opened a little way and a hand and arm appeared, groped towards a little window sill and deposited a milk can beside two others already there.

"Sally," said Ben, softly, and there sounded a quickly smothered cry; the door flew wide, and, clad in a flannel dressing gown, Sally herself stood before them.

"Ben Jones!" she exclaimed. "Well, I'm jiggered!" And she looked it, with her short black hair tousled and her big dark eyes wide and wondering. Ben explained.

"Sally, this is Miss Hetty Carol. Could you possibly put her up for the night? Hetty, this is Miss Sally Silver . . . and I know she will if she can."

The two girls looked at each other, Sally frankly summing up.

She was a square-faced, fearless-eyed, wide-mouthed girl, of about twenty, with a rather dumpy figure, strongly-built and vigorous-looking. Her big dark eyes were very telling, but they did not constitute prettiness. There was nothing pretty about Sally. She just looked down-right, courageous, and, as Ben had said, good. And she was just about exactly what she looked.

"What's the trouble?" she asked at last. "Come in out of the cold, for a start." And she stood aside to let them in, and, as they passed added, "I was just putting out my milk can. I'd begun to undress when I remembered it."

When the door was shut they stood in the narrow passage and held council.

Hetty let Ben do the talking. She leaned back against the wall, feeling utterly worn out.

Ben explained quietly. Half-way through his explanation Miss Silver interrupted him.

"Nuff said," she observed. "There's a couch in the sitting-room, and you're more than welcome." She turned to Hetty, giving the assurance warmly.

"Thank you. I don't know what to say. Just thank you," faltered Hetty.

Sally turned back to Ben.

"Now then, young fellermelad, there's times when the best of

male folks is no more than matter in the wrong place. So trickle homewards, Ben Jones an' keep an easy mind."

"Sally," he said gratefully. "You're a brick."

"You'll get that brick in the neck, boy, if I hear any more eye-wash from you. Ain't you got no tact? Can't you see we want to cry on each other's necks, her an' me?"

A tearful little laugh from Hetty made this seem really probable.

"All right," said Ben. "Good-night, Hetty, and don't worry."

She gave him her hand.

"Good-night, Ben . . ."

He gave the hand a friendly squeeze.

"I'll call in on your father and tell him you're all right," he said.

And went out. The door was half closed behind him when Hetty turned to Sally.

"I'm so grateful . . . I can't tell you . . ." she said, her eyes shining through unshed tears. "I don't see what makes you so kind . . . There's no reason why you should . . ."

"There's all the reasons in the world," said Sally. "There's you—you look played out. And there's me—I'd feel a worm not to do a simple thing like this for anyone. And there's him." She jerked her head in the direction of the door through which Ben had just passed. "He's one of the best, ain't he?" That was softly added.

The quiet of the night was suddenly shattered by the shrilling of whistles, the booming of horns, the shrieking of sirens and the sweet exultant pealing of bells.

Ben put his head in again.

"There's the new year," he announced.

Sally piloted Hetty up a steep, narrow stairway to a room at the top of the house. It was a cosy little room, an attic, really, with sloping ceiling and dormer window. An open doorway revealed the fact that the bedroom led immediately out of it.

"So we can blow in an' out of each other's rooms like a couple of balmy spring zephyrs," said Sally, as she displayed the extent of her domain. "I'd offer you the bed, only it don't put anything over the couch for comfort."

"I wouldn't take the bed, anyway," said Hetty. "I feel an awful bother. I wish I could do something."

"So you can. Take your hat and coat off and make some cocoa. It's in the cupboard, and there's the saucepan by the fire. There's only a drain of milk, but it'll have to do."

Sally hustled round while Hetty found the things, mixed the cocoa, and sat stirring it over the fire. The commonplace employment served to steady her. The large and terrifying aspects of the evening were gradually shrinking to proportions she could get into focus. By the time Sally had turned the couch into a bed, the cocoa was done and poured into cups, and presently they were drinking it, sitting in front of the little fire.

In the quietness that followed, Hetty told Sally details of the evening's events, which Ben had not known, and Sally listened and nodded understandingly.

"I suppose I ought to have defied her," Hetty finished. "But after the kid said that about spoiling her fun, it didn't seem worth while. Things seem to sort of snap, sometimes, and you're done. You can't say or do another thing. And you don't care what happens."

"I know," said Sally.

"But it all begins to look different already," went on Hetty. "Do you despise me for being in such a fright?"

"Pooh, a sudden fright's nothing. You just pack off to bed and sleep, an' things'll seem a lot more rosy in the morning."

When they parted for the night, Hetty in one of Sally's nightgowns lay in her impromptu bed watching the dying flicker of the firelight on the ceiling. Then:

"Sally," she called softly, raising herself on one elbow and pitching her voice towards the open bedroom door. "What'll your landlady say to me being here?"

"She won't say nothing," answered Sally. "Comfy?"

"Lovely, Sally. I'm terribly grateful. I don't seem it I know. But I am."

"Oh, hush-up about that. I'm glad of your company."

There was a silence, while the lights on the ceiling danced duller and duller.

"Sally," called Hetty again. "You don't mind me calling you Sally, do you?"

"Call me anything but early, love," answered Sally, with drowsy flippancy.

"Well, Sally, how'd you get to know Ben?"

"He comes into the tea-shop where I work. In the City, it is, an' he was up on business. I waited on him the first time and we got talking. One of the absolute best, Ben is."

"He thinks the same of you."

"Go on." A touch of incredulity in that, and a touch of eagerness in the incredulity.

"He does. He said you were perfectly good. And you are."

A long silence, this time, so long that the flickering light had dimmed to a glow, and Hetty asked:

"Asleep, Sally?"

"No, just thinkin'." The eagerness was gone now. "Goodnight, Hetty."

The following day was Saturday, and an early day for Sally at the tea-shop; her work hours varied a good deal. To-day she set off almost immediately after breakfast. They had, therefore, but little time for the discussion of plans. Besides, Hetty wasn't able to make any plans yet.

"I'll have to go home and see how things are, first," she said.

"Mind, now," answered Sally. "No letting that woman put it across you in any way. You're welcome to stop here, so don't stick any nonsense. It never pays to be a doormat to anyone."

"But I've no money to speak of," began Hetty.

"Then don't speak of it, ole dear."

"Only what I happen to have in my purse—about eight-and-six."

"This high finance is more'n I can stand all at once, so break it to me gently. Meantime, we can rub along for a bit, anyway." Sally pulled a velvet tam over her black hair, and wrapped a strip of fur—from the back of some beast or beasts unknown—round her neck, and added: "I'll sing a little song of explanation about you to mother Mallins as I go out. So long."

And she went out.

Left to herself, Hetty first tidied up the room, then she became involved in conversation with Mrs. Mallins, whose curiosity brought her up to see what Miss Silver's friend was like, so that

it was getting on towards noon when she was ready to go out. The morning was clear, and the chill air and wintry sunshine refreshing.

So bright and refreshing that it gave her the feeling that the scene of yesterday evening was unreal. As she reached the main road she saw Ben getting off a tram, so she stopped and waited for him. He came towards her, carrying a large canvas suit-case in one hand, and a big brown-paper hat-bag in the other. She recognised the suit-case as her own, and suddenly the hopeful feeling engendered by the morning, was clouded by fears.

He set the suit-case down on the kerb and greeted her.

"You weren't thinking of going home, were you, Hetty?" he asked.

"Yes, I was on my way. Have you seen them? Is it all no use?"

She looked down at the suit-case, and then up at him.

Their young eyes met, hers troubled and expectant; his very sober.

"It's not a bit of good," he said gravely. "She still storms at the very mention of you, and your father backs her up. Not because he *wants* to; just because he daren't cross her."

She nodded; her eyes big and wide beneath her hat brim.

"But Bella . . . I can't leave Bella to her."

"You couldn't do any good with her yet. Bella's excited about it all, and flattered because Mrs. Carol makes a fuss of her, and discusses it with her, and quotes what she thinks, and all that sort of thing."

"Doesn't she want me back, Ben?"

Ben felt he was the sort of ruffian who'd strike a fist into the face of a child, as he answered:

"No." But there was nothing for it but to give her the truth.

"Has she said so?"

"Yes. At present she's just swelled up with a sense of her own importance. There'd only be continual scrapping over her; your pulling one way, Mrs. Carol the other. More harm than good in that."

"Yes, I see, Ben," said Hetty sombrely. "What ought I to do, then."

"Stop along with Sal for a bit. I got Bella to look out some things for you and brought 'em over . . ."

"She was glad to do it, I suppose."

"You can't call it exactly glad . . . She's proud of herself. The row was about her; it's sent her all up in the air. She feel's she's . . . I don't know . . . but . . ."

"A bit of a heroine?" put in Hetty.

"That's it exactly.

There was a pause. Hetty stood irresolute.

"It seems so cool to land on Sal," she said at last. But it wasn't all she had been thinking.

"It'll only be till you get a job," said Ben matter-of-factly.

The words came to Hetty like a flood of light into troubled darkness. While to her sensitive, over-strained mind the future had presented an unintelligible chaos, horrifying in its sheer formlessness, Ben had gone straight for the practical issue, and suddenly the future seemed to settle down to a definite meaning, as the bits of coloured glass in a kaleidoscope resolve themselves into patterns.

"Why, of course!" she said, hardly audibly. "That's what I've got to do—get a job. Of course I have."

"You've got to strike out for yourself," said Ben. "I've always half thought that."

"Have you? You've never said so."

"Well the time hadn't come till this happened. But now I'm sure of it. You can't do anything for Bella yet . . . So you've just got to strike out for yourself."

"Be independent," supplemented Hetty. Ben nodded.

"Of course . . . of course . . ." she agreed, nodding too. Ben carried the suit-case to the oil shop and up to Sally's room for her. On their way, they bought papers and spent nearly an hour going through the "wanted" advertisements, making a list of those that seemed likely, and that demanded personal application.

"Go up with Sal on Monday and try those in London first," counselled Ben as he was leaving, and Hetty took his counsel.

"Be independent."

There was a ring to those two words that sounded in her ears like a sudden clarion call.

CHAPTER V

The City was more or less of a wilderness to Hetty. She could count her previous visits to its noise and confusion upon the fingers of one hand. So it took her some little time to find the addresses she wanted. However, with the aid of several policemen, she did find them.

But she didn't find a job.

Her utter lack of experience outside home seemed an insurmountable barrier.

It also added to her disappointment; because, being inexperienced, she had pictured herself, not perhaps getting a job within the first five minutes, but, at least, getting one.

During the following week and a half, she thought she must have been up for judgment before every managing clerk in London. Some of them had looked at her with interest; some with pleasure; some hadn't looked at her at all. Some had dismissed her, angry that inexperienced she should waste their time. Some had done it regretfully, thinking how pleasant it would have been to play for glances from those temperamental eyes of hers. Some had done it with a touch of pity for her fresh youth and earnestness.

But they had all done it.

She began to feel disappointed, but Sal always quite cheerily said that she'd got to expect a few set-backs, and mustn't lose heart.

She used to have lunch—coffee and a bun—at Sal's tea shop, and report the morning's progress or lack of it, and one lunch-time she was in the middle of this, when a man entered the shop, took off his hat to Sal with a good deal of style, and addressed her thus:

"Walla—walla. How's the world treating my little thre'p'ny bit this morning?"

But he broke off on seeing Hetty and added:

"So help me! If it ain't Miss Carol!"

And Hetty found herself looking up at the man who had called himself "Uncle Jimmy"—the man who had invited Bella to kiss him.

"I got to have a talk with Miss Carol," he added.

"I don't want to talk to you," said Hetty, in a low voice.

"Then you can do the listening," he retorted.

"I didn't know that you and him was friends," said Sal to Hetty.

"And I'll agree with you we *aren't,*" he answered, giving Hetty no time. "Last time I had the pleasure of meeting Miss Carol she told me to clear out of the house."

"Oh, you was in that affair. I see," said Sal. "Well, I guess she don't want nothing to do with you, so dribble along, Jimmy, and let her alone."

But Jimmy Cliff sat down at Hetty's table, facing her, and ordered sandwiches and coffee. Something in his near-together eyes made her indignation and nervousness cool suddenly.

"All right," she said. And Sally went off to obtain the sandwiches and coffee.

Jimmy took off his hat and placed it under his chair, settled his tie—he was rather "doggily" dressed—and smoothed back his sleek, yellow hair. Then he leaned towards Hetty, elbows on the table.

"I never meant no harm," he began, with an earnestness that was sincere, in spite of the innate jollity that couldn't help showing through. "I wouldn't 'a' hurt that kid sister of yours for anything in the world. Only she just looked a double-dyed cutey, made for a cuddle; but I never meant no manner of harm."

Hetty looked at him.

His face bore the marks of careless high spirits, rather than of any definite evil. She recognised that in her untutored way, putting it to herself.

"He doesn't look so *bad* . . ."

After a moment:

"Even if you didn't; I think it was horrid of you," she said abruptly, and that plunged them into the very middle of the question.

"Go on! What's the harm in a innocent little canoodle with a baby like that?"

"I don't know, but I think it was horrid of you."

"You are a one!"

"I know it *looked* horrid. You looked horrid, and so . . . so did *she,*" went on Hetty, stoutly. "And I know this, too; she may be a baby, but you wouldn't have done it if she hadn't been a *pretty* baby . . . You know you wouldn't."

"Done what, you little cuckoo?"

"*Flirted* with her. I don't care what you say, you *were* flirting with her."

"Haven't you got an obstinate jaw, though!"

"I don't care what you say," repeated Hetty, her face very flushed. "And here's another thing I know," she went on suddenly, for knowledge was coming to her in little flashes under the stimulus of having to argue. "I know Bella isn't such a baby as she looks; and, what's more, you know it too."

Jimmy Cliff coloured beneath that onslaught.

"These women! Argue, argue, argue . . ." was the brightest thing he could find to say.

"Belle's never been used to that sort of thing" added Hetty. "I've never *let* her be used to it."

He leaned suddenly nearer.

"Now let me tell you something," he said, pointing a finger to add emphasis to his already emphatic tone. "You won't be able to stop her."

"I know that, because I'm not at home," she answered, distress in her voice.

"Not because of that. 'Twouldn't matter how much at home you were; you couldn't stop her. She's got the natural-born 'come hither' in her eye, that goes to the heads of us men. Get me?"

"I don't see how you can say such hateful things!"

"Cut it out, girlie," said Jimmy, tolerantly. "And get down to tacks. You got it in *your* eye, come to that."

"I haven't!" cried Hetty, hot with indignation.

"Yes, you have! Only while one eye says 'Come hither!' the other says 'Keep your distance, and keep it good and clear!' But it's there, all the same," he laughed.

The conversation was interrupted by the return of Sally with his order, and he removed his elbows to allow her to set it before him.

He drank some coffee and demolished a sandwich before he spoke again.

Then he said:

"You put up a pretty spunky fight that evening, and without waving any sort of flags about it, I'll just say this: that your little sister has got a brother in yours truly. A brother what'll *be* a brother. What'll keep his words brotherly, and his manners brotherly . . ."

There was earnestness beneath the merry exterior and Hetty leaned a little towards him: "And his . . . *thoughts?*" she asked.

He drew back, sharply.

"God! Girlie, but you do get to the meaning of things!" he cried, admiration in his tone.

"We got to," she said, simply. "And his thoughts?" she persisted.

He slapped his hand, palm flat, on the table, with a force that made the coffee cups hop.

"And his thoughts, damn it; and his thoughts," he said.

"Thank you," she said. "I believe you."

He finished his coffee and beckoned Sal to get him more and through a mouthful of sandwich added:

"I'll keep an eye on the kid; don't you worry. Now look here . . ." he leaned forward again. "I been away for a week on business for my firm, but I called round at your place only yesterday, and your ma told me that you'd cleared out. An' I've had you on my conscience ever since, thinking I was the cause of it."

"So you were," she answered; then, quickly: "No, you weren't. *She* was. It had got to come some time. She and I can't hit it. 'Tisn't fair to say it was you."

"What are you goin' to do, then?"

"I've been all the morning trying to get a job. But nobody wants anyone that's not done anything but keep house before."

"What sort of a job d'you want?"

"I don't mind. Anything just for a start."

Jimmy Cliff sat thinking, drumming his fingers on the table.

"Isn't there anything you can do?" he asked.

"Only keep house," she answered.

"It isn't service you're aiming at, is it?"

"I don't know that I'm aiming at anything in particular. I want to make some money . . ."

"Well, look here, I've got a lady friend, what's leaving the cash desk of a barber's shop this week to better herself. How'd that suit?"

Hetty looked at him a moment.

"What would I have to do?"

"Take the money, give the right change, and look nice."

"I could do that," said Hetty naively.

"Finish your coffee, an' I'll take you round. He's a Frenchman, the proprietor, an' I'm a regular customer, so he knows me."

She obeyed, and rose presently with a feeling that she knew a lot more about the world than she had known before.

She was presently threading her way, beside Jimmy, through the crowded city streets towards the narrow-fronted little barber's shop owned by Monsieur Fontaine.

Monsieur Fontaine, stout and bland, his shining bald head by no means a convincing advertisement for the rows of bottles of hair-grower that stood on the counter, greeted Jimmy amicably. It was a slack moment for him; his customers were all at lunch, so were most of his employees. The cash desk stood, empty, on the left of the doorway.

"Bong jore," remark Jimmy. "Likewise, parley-vous, Ou, la-la, and how's your father? I've brought your new cash girl to see how she likes the look of you, monsew."

The effrontery of Jimmy's attack rather bewildered Hetty, but Monsieur Fontaine took it quite unmoved. He removed his pipe from his mouth and looked at Hetty with shrewd, kindly brown eyes.

"Good at the figure?" he inquired.

"Well, I'll ask you just to look at her—Venus de Milo in a coat and skirt," put in Jimmy.

"You do ze add-up, ze take-from, an' give ze right change?" asked Monsieur Fontaine, taking no notice of the interruption.

"Oh, yes, I could do that," said Hetty.

"An' keep ze books?"

"Well, I can keep just *accounts,*" she said doubtfully.

"You have ze reference—yes?"

But Hetty was obliged to answer no.

Fortunately for her, Monsieur Fontaine prided himself upon his judgment of people. It was his boast that he could tell an honest man with one look, and a rogue without even turning his head.

Jimmy leaned towards him, saying in a whisper:

"References be hanged. Look at her eyes, and don't miss her."

Monsieur Fontaine waved him off. He was fully alive to the business value of a pair of temperamental eyes behind the glass of his cash desk, but such considerations were not his only ones. He had his dash of temperament, too, and it prompted him to quick likes and dislikes. He liked Hetty. So he finished the scene by engaging her.

"Vive lar *France!*" said Jimmy joyously.

"There you are my dear! Got a job. Come to your Uncle Jimmy and give him——" he broke off, colouring a little, but still laughing.

"And give him a pretty handshake," he finished impudently.

When business details were settled they left, Hetty with the prospect before her of starting independent work two days hence, and of earning thirty shillings a week.

"Which," observed Jimmy, as they pushed through the streets, "is better than a dob in the eye with a burnt stick."

"I never thought I'd have anything to thank you for," said Hetty, with the frankness of youth. "But I have. And I *do* thank you."

"Oh, it's just a clearing of accounts. Bye-bye."

And they parted.

Hetty now found herself suddenly launched into a world of men. From the time she started work in the morning to the time she left in the evening, she saw almost only men. And, mostly, the same men day after day. Business men chiefly, coming in for their daily shave and gossip, there being no newsmonger like a barber. Tall men, short men, fat men, thin men, men in a hurry, men with leisure, worried-looking men, jolly-looking men,

decent-looking men, rotten-looking men, young men, old men, middle-aged men.

It was not until her second week there that any of them took much notice of her. During her first week she was shy and unaccustomed, so afraid of giving wrong change that she scarcely raised her eyes from the desk. Jimmy Cliff was the only one she spoke to. But when her first shyness was over, she began to look about her.

After that there was many a man whose thoughts of his morning shave became mixed up with thoughts of a pair of grey eyes that shone like stars amid clouds of soft, dusky hair, eyes that hinted at depths, emotions and mysteries.

She began to get small offerings of flowers and sweets, invitations to lunch and tea, offers of theatre tickets. And for a time she found it rather nice. She did not accept the invitations, but she rather liked getting them. She took the flowers, and shared the sweets with Sal, and it became easier to smile her "good-mornings," and to exchange a few words of easy chaff with the customers.

At the end of three months, she was feeling a quite new sort of confidence; the confidence of a newly-discovered power; the power of woman over man. She had met so few men, that she had not known that she possessed it. But now she found that she could make men smile at her, linger to talk, be merry or huffed as simply as the master hand can order the prancings of a puppet. And for a while there was a certain satisfaction in pulling the strings.

And since she felt no smallest flicker of emotion on account of any of them, it gave her a feeling of being both powerful, and perfectly safe.

It was when she overheard two men talking about her that she was pulled to a sudden halt.

"She's got the eyes of all creation. Knows how to use 'em, too," said one.

And the other replied with a laugh:

"She's the sort of girl that a man'll put poison in his wife's coffee for, believe me."

And they both laughed at that.

But Hetty did not laugh. She was fuming.

When she got home she looked at herself in the glass, and said fiercely:

"I'm not! I'm not!"—angry with all mankind for what one man had said.

After that Monsieur Fontaine's customers found that their chocolates and flowers were steadfastly declined, and that they could scarcely wring a smile from the starry-eyed cash girl.

They did not know just how deeply she despised them for their trying.

"A girl can do anything with a man," she said to Sally one evening, contemptuously. But the incident had not only led to that discovery; it had taught her where her own conduct had been drifting. She revealed that when she added suddenly:

"It all came of this silly carelessness. Take Jimmy Cliff, for instance. There's a heap of good in Jimmy; but he's just careless. D'you know Sal, I believe carelessness is the rottenest thing in the whole world."

"Say it with music, love," replied Sal indulgently, which wasn't helpful. But Ben, when she told him about it, quite agreed with her.

Ben had got into the habit of having tea with Hetty and Sal every Sunday afternoon; when he would bring her news of her family, for she still did not go home. She had seen her father once; they had met at a Lyon's shop in the city, but the interview had been barren. Mrs. Carol still held undisputed sway. If Hetty went back, she understood that she went back on terms; Mrs. Carol's terms. So she stayed away, and took what comfort she could from Ben's news. The thought of Bella worried her badly, but Bella, Ben told her, still seemed supremely content where she was.

"Give her her head," was his advice. "And she'll get sick of it."

Since there was nothing else to do, she followed his advice; but worried all the same.

It was just at this point that something happened which turned thoughts and emotions into quite other channels.

A new customer, one morning, came into M'sieur Fontaine's shop.

The new customer was not like any of the other customers. He was young; and more handsome than any man Hetty had ever seen. Even more handsome than any man she had ever imagined. Everything about him seemed, to her untutored eyes, so utterly right. She thought him supremely well dressed; and she recognised that he had distinctly a "manner." She had not met a man with a "manner" before. Ben was always nice, but there was never any polish to his niceness. There was polish to this man, and it rather dazzled Hetty.

After that first day, he came into M'sieur Fontaine's every morning and quite soon Hetty was frankly watching for him. Although she did not know quite how frank she made her watching.

Then she began to wonder about him; all sorts of things; big things and little things. But chiefly she wondered whether he'd turn and look at her as he went through the shop to the room at the back and if he did not, whether he would when he paid his bill. And if he didn't then, whether he would to-morrow. Sometimes he looked at her and sometimes he did not. But he never tried to catch her attention with any of the fatuous tricks that other men employed.

He must be some very fine gentleman, she thought, this new customer; her interest in him shewed rather obviously for she had not learnt deceit, and he read it as if her poor little soul were an open book before her eyes.

And as he read, he triumphed.

Presently she was waiting for him to come into the shop as if his entrance were the very rising of the sun itself. And the question as to whether he looked at her or not had become something more than wondering.

She did not realise half of what she was feeling, but he saw it all with a deadly clearness. For he had the fiendish instinct of the "irresistible" man; the man whose hobby is making love, whom women have spoilt, and to whom truth of word or deed means less than nothing.

And he had seen the whiteness of her throat, the cloudiness of her hair, the starriness of her eyes, and that "something" about her which is more dangerous than beauty. He marked her down

for conquest. For conquest was the salt of Mr. Nickolas Kelly's existence.

But Hetty was falling in love.

There had been in her daydreams of romance, a vague but radiant being, who was Lancelot and Galahad, Hector and Perseus, Henry the Fifth, and Douglas Fairbanks rolled into one. Passion and purity; valour and chivalry; kingliness, strength and humour; the vision had possessed all these qualities. The men who mostly came into Monsieur Fontaine's shop may have possessed some of them, but they conspicuously failed to look as if they possessed any of them.

Nickolas Kelly looked as if he were the very man who had invented them.

Finely proportioned, he carried himself with a rare nobility; held his handsome head high and cultivated the dreamy, high-souled look in his eyes. His hair was brown, touched here and there with gold, and he wore it brushed smoothly back from his forehead, so that the good line of his head showed to excellent advantage. And it *was* a good line, so good, that it gave the impression of intellectual power; and perhaps the essential equipment for intellect was there, if he had chosen to develop it. But as it was he was far too deeply concerned with his physical perfections to bother about the mental side. His eyes were blue, with the curious veiled look that thick lashes give; his nose, aquiline; mouth, wide and attractively curving; chin and jaw nicely rounded and angled. He really was a most remarkable specimen.

His origin was humble and, he considered, quite unworthy of him.

His father was a greengrocer; his mother a butcher's daughter. There was a thriving little shop off Hammersmith Broadway which displayed the name of Kelly above a picturesque show of vegetables and pyramids of fruit. But Nickolas rarely mentioned that. He early developed a taste far above such things; cultivated that "manner," minced his speech and shewed great social talents.

The war gave him his chance, for luck stood by him; saw that he avoided the nasty dangerous areas, where impolite shells might spoil his beauty, and finally wangled him a commission.

As a second loot, he looked like a young god, and behaved like a young devil. As one disillusioned damsel had spitefully observed:

"Four penn'orth of uniform and the officers' mess had given him a polish which looked very like the real thing."

On demobilization he got a clerkship in a wholesale leather merchant's business in the City, but his ambitions lay much more in the public eye than a mere clerkship. So, his luck still holding, he migrated to the film studios, and earned the right to call himself a film actor by doing "crowd" work, after which he joined the stock company of a small, new producing firm, was paid five pounds a week whether he were acting or not, and managed to have what was to him a very good time on it.

A habit of being shaved at Monsieur Fontaine's had developed when he was a clerk in the city, and the merest chance had taken him there again; the same chance that decided that he should notice that Hetty had a complexion like roses and milk—Nickolas wasn't original—eyes that kept looking at you even long after you'd left the shop, and a sensitive soft, feminine mouth.

One afternoon totally unexpectedly, he came into the shop again. He had been in during the morning, and Hetty had been thinking of him ever since. When she saw him at this unusual time she coloured from throat to temple, and he watched the blush spread as he made his way to the counter. As it happened, there was no one in the shop, though voices came from the room beyond, so Hetty left the desk and attended to his wants.

He asked for a hair tonic and an extravagant flask of Cologne water. And she nearly dropped them in the ecstasy of the occasion. Conscious that his eyes never left her face, she packed the bottles and made out a check for their price, raised her eyes, and felt herself drowning in the veiled blue deeps of his.

He leaned on the counter, so that his face was within a little distance of her own. He could hear the quick flutter of her breath.

"What were you thinking of when I came in?" he asked, his musical voice very low and persuasive.

Hetty was almost disastrously sincere. Before she could stop the word, she answered:

"You."

He went forward to conquest confidently, now. Kelly was the type of man who could go into a love affair almost cold-bloodedly; who could be attracted by a girl without losing either his heart or his head to any noticeable degree.

He was the born dallier; love-making was so much more in his line than love itself. He pictured himself always as the man who could kiss to his heart's content, and who could ride away, whenever it seemed convenient to him to do so, without suffering a pang. He never dreamed of danger to himself in these adventures. How, therefore, was he to foresee danger in the sweet, worshipping eyes of Hetty? In those tender, tremulous lips of hers? Or in the music of her voice?

Such foresight was not granted him. His devouring vanity demanded only that he should conquer.

"Me?" he said, softly. "That's funny; because I was thinking of you."

"Were you?" Her lips only just managed the question.

He nodded.

"What's more, I'd been thinking of you ever since morning," he added.

"Had you?" That was a whisper.

He nodded again.

"I'm mostly thinking about you these days. Didn't you know?"

She shook her head.

"No."

"Come now, is that true?"

"How could I know?" she asked, breathlessly.

"Haven't you seen it in my eyes?"

"Sometimes you haven't even looked at me!"

Something perilously near to being a cry, in that.

He leaned nearer.

"Didn't dare," he whispered.

"Then how—how should I—dare?" she faltered.

"If I dare now, will you?"

"I—I don't know——"

"Look at me, dear. Look at me," he urged.

Slowly she raised exquisite eyes to his.

He ought to have been shot for the beauty he desecrated in that moment. She was all sweet bewilderment—pliant, and easy to take by storm.

He gave a quick look round, then leaned still further over the counter and kissed her quivering mouth.

"Little mate!" he whispered. "We've always known, haven't we? You've always been my girl, haven't you?"

But she was leaning back against the desk, crying. It was her first kiss, and it meant something to her that his self-poisoned nature could not even remotely dream of. His innocence was such ages behind him; hers, still upon her; fresh and sweet and of a gossamer delicacy.

He petted and persuaded her back to calmness, and presently she once more raised her eyes to his—dazzled eyes, alight with a new glory that he did not deserve to see.

The radiant being had become real, by some blessed miracle; he was here before her, declaring his undying love; and reality seemed even more wonderful than any dream could be.

Hetty was in love.

When she reached home that evening she found Ben in the little sitting-room. Sally wasn't home yet, and Mrs. Mallins had allowed him to come up to wait.

He was almost startled at the sight of Hetty for she was a new, transformed Hetty. Whatever effect Nickolas Kelly was destined to have upon her, he had already done one thing: he had called forth her latent beauty, and it shone now in her ecstatic eyes, hung upon the tender curve of her lips, glowed in the new colour of her cheek, so that from being interesting, she had suddenly bloomed into loveliness.

"Ben," she cried, "I'm so glad you're here! There's no one in the world I'd rather see this evening." She caught both his hands in hers and raised her starry eyes, so happy, yet half-shy, to his.

"Such a wonderful day it's been," she went on, hanging back from his hands like a child. "Such wonderful things have happened! I never thought he could love me. Never dreamt that he noticed me. But he does. He does! Oh Ben, I'm just the happiest girl in all creation!" And she looked it.

He stood looking down at her, his face quite still and set; a curious sort of blank astonishment in his hazel eyes.

"Oh?" he said at last. "Tell me about it."

"There's nothing more to tell, except that he's just wonderful. There's never been anyone like him. There couldn't have been. Oh, and I'm sorry for every other girl in the world, because there's only one of him, and he's mine!"

She had not been able to tell Nickolas Kelly all this, at least, not in words. In looks and smiles and little quivering sighs, yes; but it was only to Ben that she was able to talk. And it was to Ben that she told her feeling now.

He listened in his grave way; was glad of her happiness, and left her later, feeling that life had all gone wrong.

Nickolas Kelly, on the other hand, felt more and more, as days went by, that life was quite all right.

Hetty was attractive in a rather fresh way. Her unworldliness and shyness piqued his ardour. And her adoration, her joy in his handsomeness, her belief in the nobility of his nature, her general attitude that he was a young immortal condescending to a mere human girl, fed his vanity. To this type of man, that is one of the most important things of life. The male destroyer is as jealous of his power as any female vamp.

Sally Silver, by this time very truly devoted to Hetty, was not quite so satisfied about Nickolas.

"What's it supposed to be?" she asked Hetty one day. "Walking out or a proper engagement?"

Hetty had not thought, and said so, but added that they were going to be married some day.

"Then why doesn't he give you a ring?" Sal wanted to know.

"I think we've been too happy to remember," laughed Hetty.

Next morning when Kelly came into the shop she repeated what Sal had said.

"Walking out?" he repeated disgustedly. "Men like me don't walk out. Of course we're engaged." And he appeared quite hurt. That afternoon, over a late tea in a little tea shop where one particular cosy corner had become their recognised property, he took a ring from his pocket and shewed it to her.

It was not a very splendid ring, but Hetty was too deeply in love to criticise. To her, each shabby little stone was a crystal

distilled from his tender thoughts of her, and set in a golden circle—symbol of eternity.

"What makes you love me so, Nickie? I'm so—oh, I don't know, sort of small compared with you. What makes you love me so?"

He told her, and she glowed and thrilled as she listened.

"It doesn't seem possible that I should have won your love," she added. "There must have been heaps of girls who'd have been glad to."

"Oh, I don't know," he said becomingly modest. "None of 'em ever meant a penny piece to me, anyway."

"Didn't they? Not one? Am I the very first?"

"The very, very first," he assured her unblinkingly.

"Nickie, you are so wonderful!"

"Oh, I don't know," he said again. "But there's never been anyone except you. A man doesn't say much about this sort of thing; it sounds—sloppy. But I think I've always known that there was *you* somewhere, and I've kept myself for you."

He said it with such sincerity that it is a question whether, by some subtle self-hypnotism, he did not actually believe it—at least while he said it.

It was getting easier every day to make convincing love to Hetty.

And he looked so noble and so romantic, with those deadly eyes of his ardently close to her own, that she believed every word of it and praised God for him through her whole being.

Hetty engaged to be married was the most radiant thing. Being engaged to be married was this wonderful happiness which turned even the most prosaic aspects of life to things of rainbow ecstasy. Being married was, of course, a thing even less realisable; a thing of rapture and kisses and cosy little meals to-gether, all like the little meals they had to-gether now, only very much more so. She loved the notice Kelly attracted; it made her heart beat with happy possessive pride. She felt that happiness could go no further than the happiness of this time.

Kelly's vanity demanded that he should always appear to her as something marvellously superior; not only to other *men,* but to herself. He had to keep her looking up to him, almost

abjectly, and spent an amazing amount of energy in thinking out schemes by which he should add to his own glory.

Limited money prevented him from really making the splash his personality deserved, but he could not resist the temptation of shewing himself off to Hetty as one whose real sphere is the sphere of glittering expensiveness. He therefore told her to get herself a clinking dress, as he was going to take her to dine with him at the Madrid. The Madrid was a name to her, no more; and she could ill afford "getting" herself clinking frocks. She had to translate that command into making herself a frock.

She put a lot of thought and taste into the making of that frock and just about all her heart, and it was a very grand affair, to her, when she finally put it on, when the great evening came, and she surveyed herself in Sally's mirror—a little bit at a time, the mirror being small.

"A duchess, love," said Sally, surveying her, too. "A duchess is what you might be. Funny how some girls might be anything, and others couldn't ever be nothing but what they are. If a prince himself was to marry me to-morrow, I'd go on being Sally Silver just the same, but *you* wouldn't; you'd be a princess, and nobody'd guess as you hadn't been one all your life."

Hetty laughed excitedly.

"Oh, I'm going to be something much better than a princess," she said happily, as she slid into her big tweed coat and wrapped it round her. "I'm going to be Mrs. Nickolas Kelly. Good-bye, dear! *Don't* sit up. I'll be dreadfully late." And she kissed her friend and ran downstairs on dancing feet.

She was to meet Nickolas in the foyer of the Madrid at seven and she was on time to the very tick. There were a lot of people there, but she saw only Nickolas, looking his very wonderfullest in his evening kit.

He was hurrying towards her and she smiled, because she thought he hurried in his eagerness to be with her, and looked at him all sweet and tremulous with happiness, the light that never was on land or sea, in her eyes.

But his first words were:

"Good heavens! Didn't I tell you to wear evening clothes?"

She experienced the incredible feeling that he had hit her, and for a moment could only stare; then:

"Yes," she answered. "I made myself a dress specially."

"What d'you want to put on that coat for? Why didn't you wear a cloak?"

"I haven't got one." Her ecstatic happiness seemed to be evaporating.

"Well, for my sake, hurry along to the dressing-room and take it off."

And he turned and moved away, his handsome head high, as if he didn't belong to her at all.

She made her way to the dressing-room. The room was crowded with elegantly gowned and cloaked and coiffured women. Jewels flashed from their hair and their throats and their arms. She had only a little brooch in the front of her frock and the ring Kelly had given her.

She felt that the attendant looked at her superciliously, and handled the coat as one who fears contamination.

In the long mirror, her little frock seemed to have lost its "evening" look. In the dictionary of fashion, to be "clothed" and to be "dressed" are almost opposing terms. Hetty's frock reached nearly to her throat, nearly to her ankles, and actually touched her elbows. She was clothed. The women around her showed their backs to the waist, their arms to the shoulder, and their legs to the knee. They were dressed. Without putting it into words, Hetty sensed the difference and was suddenly half-afraid to go back to Kelly again.

But to be even half-afraid of that wonderful lover of hers, was like sacrilege. She was hopeful again as she made her way back to the foyer; and eager for his approval; for her pretty little frock to make amends for the coat. But there was not much welcome in his eyes as they met. He looked up and down her slim length and then said sulkily:

"I've booked a table now, or we'd go somewhere that didn't matter."

Cruelty could go very little further; but Hetty was blind to any defect in him. She was miserable with the feeling that she had let him down.

Shy and uncertain as she entered the big brilliantly-lighted dining-room, she looked just what she was—a tentative little thing in a world that was new to her. She did not know

where to go or what to do. She only felt that all eyes were on Kelly, and she fancied that everyone was pitying him because of her. As a matter of fact, handsome as he was, as many admiring eyes were turned upon her as upon him.

She was particularly lovely and appealing in her confusion, and she was something considerably fresher than he was. But she did not know that.

It seemed centuries before she was sitting at a table for two, with Kelly opposite.

"For God's sake," he said, touchily. "Do cheer up. You look like a mute at your own funeral."

"Well, you're angry with me," she said, faltering.

That smoothed down his temper a little.

"No," he said, magnanimously. "Not angry exactly. Disappointed."

"I'm terribly sorry . . . Nicko; I'd do anything. . . . Just tell me, dear. . . ."

"Oh, those things can't be *told;* you ought to *know* them."

"But I. . . I don't, Nicko . . ." she began, but the waiter interrupted them.

The meal was a bewildering medley of things she had never seen before and did not understand. The number of table implements confused her, and she wondered which she ought to use. Her anxiety to win back his full approval made her more nervous than she need have been and the importance of doing things correctly became exaggerated in her mind.

But she did not know. The hors d'oeuvres presented a complex, many-coloured problem, confusing as a kaleidescope. The only things she recognised were the sardines, and she hated sardines. It confused her that the waiter should hand her this complicated dish and stand by while she made up her mind. She took a sardine, dropped the fork, was given another and made an almost blind jab for something else; she didn't know what, until Kelly said;

"What a mixture! Sardine and anchovie!" And there was very little of the lover in his tone.

The sardine made her feel sick, and the anchovie was so salt that she felt it was taking the skin off the roof of her mouth,

and Kelly was becoming more and more sulky and silent, until presently he was only speaking to find fault.

Her lack of experience had not shewn at the obscure restaurants he had taken her to before. And, in the anticipation of dazzling her with his own splendour, he had not thought of it shewing at the Madrid. The evening that was to have been such a triumph for him was going all awry, and he was cross.

He was only a gold-washed hero, and when things did not please him, the inferior metal was very apt to shew through.

Hetty did not know that; she was just hot with shame at her own stupidity.

She choked down the oily sardine and the briny anchovie, wondering if anything could ever have tasted nastier, or whether anyone could ever have been more utterly miserable than she was. At any rate, whatever happened, misery could go no deeper; nor could confusion and discomfort. . . .

But in thinking that she was reckoning without the next course. For after the sardines came a pinkish-looking substance dished up in a wide, fluted shell. The shell rested on a plate, and the whole thing was set before her, just as it was.

She stared down at it, cold with the premonition that this was destined to prove her Waterloo. . . . How on earth did one eat this peculiar arrangement of bits of things and pink sauce, so prettily baked in a shell? Did one put it out on to the plate beneath, or eat it out of the shell? She looked round her desperately, but could get no guidance from the diners around her, for no one seemed to be eating this amazing decoction. Or perhaps by this time she was too dazed and stupid to see.

She waited for Kelly to begin his, but he was discussing things with the wine waiter and when the waiter left, he said irritably:

"What's the matter with it? Why don't you get ahead?" She felt herself desperate then; decision forced upon her. It couldn't be possible that it was correct to eat anything out of a shell. Why, that was the way she'd seen people eating oysters and winkles down beside the stalls in the slummy market back of Apple Orchard Road. It couldn't possibly be right to eat at the Madrid as people in *those* districts eat. . . . It couldn't be.

But it was with a sort of despair that she took up the shell and tipped its contents upon the plate.

The action was not complete, when she knew that she had done the wrong thing. One quick, upward look into his face, and the knowledge was confirmed. He had never blushed for any of his sins, but this little evidence of inexperience upon her part, brought the hot colour to his face.

"Good heavens, don't you know better than *that?*" he said in a low, angry voice. "Making a fool of me in front of the whole room."

She was in such an agony of nervousness and misery now, that she seemed to be almost passed feeling anything more. There was nowhere to put the shell; she held it for a dazed moment or two, until he said;

"Put the damn thing down, and eat up that mess on your plate. Don't make things worse than they need be."

She put the shell down on to the tablecloth and obeyed, praying that something would happen just to obliterate her from the scene.

The rest of the meal was one long agony. Kelly was sullen and silent; the brass was shewing through the gilt in ugly patches. But Hetty was only self-accusing. His anger appeared to her, justified. Everything was all her own stupid fault. Why hadn't she been taught these things? Why hadn't she taught herself? Oh, why had she ever been born! Life seemed in ruins around her.

The plan had been to follow dinner with a theatre.

But when they stood outside the Madrid, she, wrapped in that offending coat; he, superb; more god-like than ever in his sulky wrath, he said,

"This theatre, now. What about it?" His tone said the rest.

"Oh, no; just let me get home . . ." she cried, and he let her go, not bothering even to put her into the tram.

She reached home to find Sal snoozing in front of the fire, an open book neglected, upon her lap. She started up as Hetty entered, blinking confusedly.

"Why, Hetty, I'd not expected you so soon. . . . What's the time? is it late? I must 'a bin sleepin'. . . ."

"No, it isn't very late," answered Hetty, her tone flat and tired.

"What's up? Didn't you go to the theatre?" Sally sat upright in her chair and looked at Hetty.

Hetty shook her head.

"Why not?"

"Oh, we . . . thought we wouldn't."

"Thought you wouldn't! It was all arranged, wasn't it?"

Hetty hesitated.

"We were tired," she said after a moment.

"Tired nothing," cried Sal with energy. "What's he bin sayin' to you? Bin trying to get fresh?"

Hetty's lips quivered. She stood for a moment, her hands clutching the lapels of her coat; then:

"I ought to have eaten it out of the shell, Sal," she said tragically.

Sally did not quite understand, naturally, but she sensed the tragedy and said, non-committally:

"Well, what if you ought?"

"But I didn't *know*. And I tipped it out onto my plate. And he was . . . ashamed . . . of me. Oh, Sal, I could cry and cry!"

She did not cry, though; she just stood and told Sally what had happened.

Sally was furious.

"Ashamed, was he?" she broke in, fiercely. "I'd 'a learnt him!"

"Why aren't we taught these things, Sal? Why doesn't someone show us, so's we'd know. Why has one-half of the world got one set of manners and the other half another set? Why can't we all be given a chance not to make fools of ourselves like I've done?"

The questions tumbled from Hetty's lips with the hot impetuosity that is born of raw, tortured feeling. The horror of the evening was still upon her, in all its freshness. She felt that nothing could ever dull the sting of her suffering. And perhaps nothing ever could, quite. There are some things we never can wholly blot out of our minds; never can wholly recover from. Some things that make us tingle afresh each time we

think of them. And somehow, it often isn't the *big* things; it's often the little ones.

"What good 'ud it be, anyway?" said Sally, argumentatively. "It'ud only be learning us so much truck as most of us 'ud never have any use for. Like all the parley-voo and fancy bits they fill you with at school. An' who'd learn us it? Not our home folk. They want us for running errands, or makin' a bit of money, or helpin' in the house. It's only one in a million as'ud ever use any of that society stuff."

"Oh, I don't know," said Hetty rebelliously. "I only know there's something back of it all that ought to be different."

"The trouble is, love, that you're one of the *ones;* you know, one of the ones as might marry a duke at any moment, so to say. An' then you'd need all the hi-tiddley-i-ti."

"I marry a duke!" cried Hetty, with sudden fire. "*I* might? Yes, an' a fine mess I'd make of it, too." She unbuttoned her coat, took it off and flung it on to the couch, a curious sort of bitterness in her tone and in her actions.

"A fine mess I'd make of it," she repeated. "A duke's wife would go to the Madrid in a tweed coat, wouldn't she? A duke's wife would drop the forks about and not know what to take when it was handed her; wouldn't she? *And* empty a shellful of stuff out on to her plate when she oughtn't to. Oh, yes! Anyway who wants to be a duke's wife? Not me.

"So long as I'm good enough to be Nicko's wife, that's all I'm asking. An' I'm *not,* Sal. I'm not. I'm not his *class.* It's all a question of class; that's all it is. If I was to marry him I'd be a drag on him. I'd humble him like I did to-night. It's no good trying to rise out of your class, Sal. A girl can't do it. There's too much to learn, an' she doesn't get a chance to learn it." Her voice shook and she caught a quick breath.

"Falling in love doesn't lift her up out of what she's born to. Don't I love Nicko? But it's all no use. He's he, an' I'm only me. And he's ashamed of me."

"Then he blame well ought to go and hang hisself!" cried out Sal hotly. "Who cares whether you ate the mucky stuff out of a shell or out of your *hat,* for that matter? You's you, however you ate it."

"He cared—he cared dreadfully. He got quite—quite angry,

and wished we'd gone to some place as didn't matter so much as the Madrid." Hetty's voice had dropped suddenly, almost to a whisper. Then:

"I've lost him, Sal. Lost him. He'll never look at me again," she added.

"If," said Sal, with considerable fire, "if he's going to let you lose him for the sake of a mouldy winkle, or whatever it was, he's better lost. He's better lost, old love, an' don't you give him another thought."

Which may all have been sound philosophy, but it certainly was poor comfort to first love suffering its first humiliation.

Hetty did not see Kelly again for three days—three days of acute misery. But in imagining that she had finally and completely lost him she was reckoning without his vanity.

For during those three days he found himself missing Hetty. He missed her freshness, her simplicity, and her worship. Women had always spoilt him, but few had ever so completely worshipped him as she did.

Kelly was not a particularly passionate man; he was more concerned with the gratification of his vanity than of his fleshly appetites, but he did not intend that his affair with Hetty should end in this way. He never had intended that it should end in any way but one way, and had been working with all his insidious talent, towards it.

What he had not sufficiently noticed was that he had been willing to go so slowly. Usually, he did not bother to be cautious. His idea of women might be symbolised by a tree laden with ripe plums; if one didn't fall for him, another would. He was not fastidious.

He knew that he had only to adopt a forgiving attitude, for Hetty to be only too happy to be forgiven. He pictured himself pardoning her for her clumsy inexperience, and the picture pleased him.

So he went back to M'sieur Fontaine's shop. The actuality was even more gratifying than the picture he had imagined. In her perfect honesty, Hetty let him see just what her suffering had been; just what her joy was at being with him again.

Leaning over the counter, she quite humbly confessed her un-

worthiness; apologising for her unutterable stupidity that night at the Madrid, begging him to overlook it just this once; she'd try never to be so silly again. She hadn't known. But she'd learn; oh, yes, she'd learn. She *could,* she was sure she could.

She could do anything to please him. She forgot her bitter protestations to Sally that a girl couldn't learn, couldn't ever rise; must be content to remain in the world she happens to be born into. She forgot everything but that her wonderful lover was with her again, willing to overlook her lack of worldly knowledge, willing to come back to her; to give her, as she put it to herself, another chance.

So Kelly re-conquered, and they spent the evening at the pictures, their heads very close together, their hands tightly clasped. Afterwards he took her to the tram in a taxi, just so that he might kiss her good-night. And she gave herself to his arms, yielded her lips to his, sighing out her ecstatic gratitude that he had come back to her.

"Little darling Hetty," he whispered, "how am I to let you go? I could just pick you up and carry you off—darling, little, wonderful girl."

She laughed out her happiness and put shy arms around him.

"Carry me off, then," she whispered back joyously. His arms gripped her suddenly, close.

"Shall I? Shall I?" His voice broke and his breath was warm on her face.

"Some day we'll be together for always. Oh, Nicko!"

His answering kiss was more like the kiss of a man than—as it generally was—the kiss of a condescending god.

But still he was not warned.

"Shall I?" he said again. "Shall I, now? Shall I run off with you and never let you go again?"

Play-acting in that, still; a touch of the conscious hero. . . . But only a touch, half lost in the drumming of his pulses; caught up and whirled away in the sudden storm that had arisen and was sweeping his senses. . . .

"Nicko!" she called his name softly. And again, "Nicko!" And was caught in the storm, too. . . .

Her idyll, up to now, had been a dream-like thing of pristine

ecstacy, and girlish, almost cool kisses, of adoration with that touch of distance that adoration implies.

Now it had become something new, something that she did not altogether understand. She was swept by an emotion that thrilled, even while it disconcerted her; an emotion that gave her, for the first time, a sense of something over-powering, in her love for him.

Love gained a new meaning; a new, half terrifying sweetness; it seemed suddenly to have lost its gentle power and become something untamed and untamable, fierce and irresistable. There was no power strong enough to stand against it. . . . Wherever love urged she must go. . . .

Her lips, usually shy and resisting, sought and found his of their own accord. Her arms held him fondly close. She heard her voice saying again:

"Carry me off, then, and never let me go again, Nicko . . . Nicko. . . ." And it was no longer a childishly joyous voice that she heard. It was a voice all shaken, and breaking with emotion, a voice that spoke against her will. In the dimness of that prosaic taxi-cab, Hetty was bidding adieu to her childhood. Her womanhood was calling to her in this voice she scarcely recognised, which was yet her own.

His arms crushed her close and ever closer; a new tenderness in their embrace and a new strength. . . . And now it was too late for warning; had warning thundered in his ears, he had been deaf to its voice. . . .

He wanted this girl in his arms, for herself; not only for her worship of him, for the pleasure in his own power over her, but for herself.

No acting in this; no consciousness of self; no vanity.

Passion-bound, they clung and kissed. Kelly, the man who had kissed so often, and found it so easy to ride away when he had kissed his full, was caught now.

The tenderness of his arms drugged Hetty's senses; but the hot strength of them awoke her to a sudden realisation of danger. . . .

Next moment she had freed herself and was pressing back away from him, into her corner of the cab, breathing quickly, lips still quivering.

Whence had come the strength which enabled her to stand against the power she had just told herself was not to be resisted, she did not know. She only knew that somehow she had broken away from danger. . . .

And though his hungry arms followed, and once more enfolded her; though his stumbling voice pleaded, implored, grew wild and desperate, she remained unpliant in his arms, and withheld her lips. He let her go, baffled and angry but more hopelessly caught than ever, and for the rest of the short journey they sat apart, their self-conscious eyes averted.

CHAPTER VI

Hetty was so happy again that even Sally, who by this time was perfectly sure that she didn't approve of Kelly, could not find it in her heart to do or say anything which might cast the least shadow of a cloud, but on the following Sunday she went out for a walk just before the usual time of Ben's weekly visit, in the hope that, left to themselves, Ben might talk the whole thing over with Hetty and perhaps put her on her guard.

But Ben didn't.

After he had given Hetty the usual home news, he volunteered a piece of information concerning himself—a thing he rarely did.

"I'm going into an architect's office," he said.

"You are! Going to give up the masonry?" Hetty had never imagined Ben changing. She had never pictured him doing anything but chipping out epitaphs on tombstones.

He nodded.

"The masonry is just about giving *us* up," he said. "Father gets dreamier and dreamier, and a business isn't carried on—on dreams. Kipling says you shouldn't make dreams your master, and he's right. I've got to get out and do something, or we'll be in Queer Street."

"But you have to wait so long to do anything in the architect line."

"So you do, but you're getting a good foundation all the time, and that counts."

"Oh, I'd want to get there much quicker than that."

"Get where?"

She laughed slightly.

"I don't know. Getting there's just an expression."

"Doesn't do any good to think of that. You've got to think of what's the next thing to do. And then you've got to *do* it. That's all there is to it."

A book lying on the table caught his attention; he was the

type that gravitates naturally towards books. He rose and picked it up and read the title of it, a puzzled frown on his brow.

"'*Manners and Customs of Polite Society.*' What is it? A new novel?"

She turned a rather pink face in his direction.

"No. Etiquette," she answered briefly.

"What d'you want that for?"

"Oh, I thought I'd like to learn about that sort of thing. I picked it up, cheap, on a book-stall; second-hand, of course."

"Second-hand? I should say it was! Mother Noah must have taught the baby animals their manners out of this. Look when it was published—1889!"

He displayed the date at the lower edge of the title page. It was in Roman numerals and she was not able to read it. She said so, with a touch of petulance.

He was turning the pages, reading little gems of advice from one page and another.

"On taking soup: Soup should be taken from the side of the spoon, every effort being made to keep the process noiseless. Before going into polite society, practise the art at home."

Ben laughed.

"How queerly they put it," he said. But Hetty was not laughing. He did not notice that, however, and flicked over the pages, reading further.

"On entering the drawing-room, do not carry your handkerchief rolled into a tight ball in your hand; take it in the centre between finger and thumb, so that it forms a graceful and fan-like expansion. . . ."

He laughed again. . . .

"Oh, you can laugh!" cried Hetty suddenly. He looked at her startled, and saw that her face was pinker than ever and her eyes almost hostile.

He shut the book with a snap.

"Well, tell me about it," he said, and the hostility vanished.

She told him of the howlers she had made that dreadful evening at the Madrid; of her temporary break with Kelly; of his forgiveness; of her new happiness.

"And now we love each other all the more," she finished. "Only I've got to be good enough for him. I've got to learn

how to behave, so's I don't disgrace him again. He's miles too good for me. But I'm going to improve myself. Just at first, I said a girl couldn't ever lift herself out of her class, however much she loved a man; but I mean to. I know I can, and I mean to. I'm not going ever to let him be ashamed of me again."

Ben suddenly slammed the etiquette book back on to the table.

"Class be damned!" he said violently. "Class be damned and damned and *damned!* . . ."

She stared at him round-eyed.

"Why, Ben," she said, "that's the first time I ever heard you say anything like that."

He twisted round and looked out of the window.

"All right," he said after a moment. "I'm sorry. I apologise."

But she wasn't at all sure that she desired his apology; his violence was so startling that she was interested in it.

"You can't learn that sort of thing out of books, anyway," he added.

"Yes, I could; if I could find the book that 'ud really teach me. I could learn things like not emptying a shell into my plate, anyway." She flushed as she spoke, for that memory kept its sting.

"I don't see that it matters all that much."

"Any *girl* would see it. What would *you* do if you knew better, an' I did an awful thing like that?" His implied criticism of Kelly had put the glint of challenge into her eyes, and the sharpness of challenge into her voice.

"I'd tell you about it. Teach you."

"Suppose you hadn't time? Suppose I'd already done it, an' when you looked up there it all was on my plate?"

He looked down at her a moment in thoughtful silence; then he said slowly,

"Well, I should think the best thing 'ud be to tip out my shell into *my* plate, too."

"What?" she said, blankly. "But. . . . Why? Two wrongs don't. . . ."

"No," he interrupted. "Only yours wouldn't be so noticeable then."

Hetty did that little action which is generally called tossing the head, and said,

"If that had been the right thing to do, Nicko would have done it. He *knows* about those things. . . . We don't."

She said it with such an absolute finality that he had nothing to add; and Sally coming back at that moment turned the trend of their talk completely.

With that sort of passion of endeavour that marked all her strivings, Hetty was now possessed with the desire to make herself worthy of Kelly.

She thought of self-improvement during the day; dreamt of it through the night. She got what she could out of the old-fashioned, stilted book, then discarded it and searched for something newer. She stood at news stalls looking through the women's papers, digging bits out of the pages devoted to hints on good form, and bought everything that she thought might be helpful and cheap enough for her to afford. With each illuminating hint she found, she felt herself mounting her ladder of endeavour; that ladder which was to bring her to equality with Kelly.

Seen through a haze of passionate worship, the steps she still had to take seemed to her many and difficult. . . .

But the day of her undeceiving was not far off.

It came on a bright June day, a day of loveliness and sunshine.

Hetty was having tea with Kelly; a late half-tea, half-supper sort of meal. He was especially fond, and she correspondingly happy, when suddenly, in the very middle of a sentence, he stopped speaking abruptly and sat staring, his jaw almost dropping. He half rose, and said hurriedly:

"Come on; let's go," but sank back into his seat again as a woman came up to their table.

Hetty watched her approach as if it were the approach of Fate, her heart suddenly pounding with fear of something unknown, unthinkable.

The woman was small, unobtrusive in dress and carriage, unobtrusive in every respect, save one—her eyes. Hetty thought

she had never seen such patient, resigned, and steadfast eyes before.

On the other side of their table the little woman stopped and said very quietly:

"Nick."

Kelly, utterly taken aback, seemed to crumple from his god-like statue and become something rather abject.

There was a tense silence. Then Hetty spoke.

"Who—who are you?" she asked, faltering.

The little woman turned towards her, her patient eyes rather pitying.

"I am Mrs. Kelly," she said in the same quiet way. "Nick's wife."

Hetty rose from her chair and stood confronting the little woman.

"You are—*who?*" she managed to say.

"Nick's wife," repeated the woman.

Hetty turned aghast eyes towards Kelly.

"Nicko—is this—Tell me it isn't—oh, Nicko!" she finished on a whispered little cry, for Nickolas suddenly resembled nothing so much as a man who is afraid. He said:

"Oh Lord! Here, let me get out of this!" And, without more ado, he got out. Just went; almost running through the shop, and even neglecting to settle for his tea as he passed the cash desk. There was a movement of surprise and consternation among the waitresses. One looked towards Hetty questioningly.

Hetty felt that she came up out of swirling darkness into blinding cruel light.

"It's all right," she heard her own voice say, "I'm paying." The waitress smiled; the consternation died down.

And looking across into the patient eyes of Kelly's wife Hetty repeated slowly:

"I'm paying."

Mrs. Kelly nodded.

"I believe you," she said simply.

There was a silence; then:

"Sit down," said Hetty abruptly.

Mrs. Kelly hesitated.

"Hadn't I better go?" she said doubtfully.

"No; tell me the rest of it, please."

Mrs. Kelly sat down, facing her.

"You've got pluck," she said.

Hetty sat down without saying anything. If Mrs. Kelly could have seen the tumult in her heart, the pain, the rebellion, the horror. Pluck! She nearly laughed.

"And pluck's about the most useful thing to have in dealing with Nicko," added Mrs. Kelly.

"You're his wife—his wife! I *do* believe it, and yet I *can't,*" said Hetty, after a moment.

"Do you want to see my certificate to prove it?"

Hetty shook her head, her agonised eyes scanning the curious, almost drab, little face of Nick's wife.

"I don't need any proof more'n what *he* gave me, just now, when he left," she said.

Mrs. Kelly nodded understandingly. There was a suggestion of mute power in the restrained line of her lips; the rather tired patience of the greenish-grey eyes held a glint of force.

"Nicko always hates awkward scenes," said Mrs. Kelly, after a moment's pause.

There was such stark revelation in that, that Hetty almost *saw,* almost *heard* the scenes that had gone before. What was to her a cataclysmic crisis was to this quiet little woman an almost commonplace happening. This scene that was to her a wild, unbelievable, nightmare thing, with no roots in anything that had ever happened before; with no precedents; a thing as sudden and unrelated to the past as a bolt from a summer sky; was, to this little woman a fresh link in a long chain of like scenes; just one more infidelity to be added to a long list of past infidelities; a scene that counted no more, and no less than all the others. Another burden added to the burdens that anyone foolish enough to marry Nickolas Kelly must bear; another pain that anyone foolish enough to love him, must endure.

It was a moment of terrible insight, which made Hetty say abruptly:

"You're paying too."

"Men like Nicko always leave the bill to the woman," an-

swered Mrs. Kelly. "Whether she happens to be his wife or his fancy."

"His wife! I can't believe it. I can't. He said he meant to marry *me*. We were engaged. He gave me a ring, even."

Hetty raised her hand above the table edge and shewed the not very splendid little ring.

"Oh yes, he'd do that," said Mrs. Kelly.

There was something almost cold-blooded in the way she tore down Hetty's house of dreams and reduced it to the commonplace level of Nicko's other "fancies."

"Don't you *feel* anything about it?" cried Hetty.

"I've been married to him six years," answered Mrs. Kelly.

But after a moment she added:

"How far has it gone, girl?" And there was something not unfeeling in that.

"How far? What d'you mean, him and me?"

Mrs. Kelly nodded.

"We were engaged. . . ."

"That all?"

"Well, he was always talking of getting married. . . . Said he couldn't wait. . . . Married! When all the time. . . ." She caught a breath, and then tumbled out enough of her love story to answer Mrs. Kelly's question.

"You're luckier than some," she said when Hetty finished.

"Luckier!" cried Hetty. "How can I be when I love him so, and he's . . . gone!"

Mrs. Kelly looked at her impersonally.

"You're green, aren't you?" she said. "You oughn't to be allowed out alone. How you managed to come through this *safe*, beats me. You'll thank your lucky stars one day."

But Hetty was not ready for consolation; she was dazed with an unbelievable suffering.

"How did *you* get to know about me?" she asked resentfully; just now she was ready to believe that ignorant bliss was preferable to such agony as being undeceived brought.

"Oh, I always know when he's found someone to make love to, because he suddenly starts making love to *me*. It's his sort of instinct to deceive me, I suppose. But it just gives him

away, that's all. Men are awfully easy to read. Men like Nicko, anyway. If you can *call* him a man."

"*I* didn't read him."

"You've got to get past the stage of believing in him; when you've once discovered that he's a liar, through and through, you know all there is to know and he can't deceive you any more. His very face is a lie; it's too beautiful for the nature it covers. Men oughtn't to be given beauty like that."

"I don't see how you can sit and talk of it so calmly. . . ."

"I ought to have been his mother, I understand him so well."

"If it was me . . . I . . . I'd . . . Oh, I don't know! But if you could only see what I'm feeling!"

"I do. I've been through it. Six years is a long time."

"His wife. His wife. I can't ever believe it! He's married; he's lied to me; . . . deceived me . . . all his loveliness to me. . . . ! But he just goes on. *He* doesn't suffer."

"He makes us."

Hetty nodded.

"You too," she said.

"Yes."

"Still?"

"Oh . . . yes. In a way."

Hetty suddenly rose.

"There's no use talking. Words aren't a bit of good."

"No. I thought I ought to go at first. . . ."

"Oh, no! I had to know it all."

"There's nothing that it's any good saying about a man like Nick. Words'll never stop him or alter him. If I can find out who the girl is he's after, I try to get to her and tell her the truth; if I can't, well, it's bad luck for her, that's all."

"And he said he'd never loved anyone but me! Oh, let me get home! Let me just get home. . . ."

"That's right, girl. You just go—and forget him. I'm going home, too."

"Home? To him? After this?" The questions stumbled out.

Mrs. Kelly rose, matter-of-factly settling her coat.

"After this? Why, this hasn't been anything particular. They've gone into hysterics sometimes."

"They! I could laugh. I swear I could laugh!"

"Then laugh. It's better than crying, any day. And they won't see that you look a bit shaken up as we go through the shop, if you laugh."

They went out into the summer dusk.

"I love him, you know," said Mrs. Kelly suddenly. "I don't suppose anything'll ever cure me of that. Good-bye, girl! Nothing's as bad as it seems."

And Hetty found herself alone.

She got home somehow, in such a chaos of feeling that she never noticed the process; flung off her coat and hat, and sat down in the darkness trying to bring order into the chaos. It was a late evening for Sally, and loneliness stretched before her for a couple of hours at least. She could not think, could not bring the events of the afternoon into focus. She could only say to herself over and over again:

"He's married—he's married!" until the words were tolling through her brain almost meaninglessly. Presently she rose, as if inaction were unbearable, lighted the gas, got the fire started, because the evening seemed chillier than ever, put the kettle on to make tea, set a cup and saucer on the table, and then sat down again staring out before her with eyes that saw nothing of the little room around her, but only the face of Nickolas Kelly's wife.

The kettle, boiling over noisily, aroused her, and she took it off the fire, the steam scalding her wrist painfully. But the physical pain came almost as a relief against the pain that was numbing her, heart and soul, within. It wrung a sudden nervy oath from her lips—a mild one, for by nature Hetty was not the kind of girl who swears, and neither had her short experience of life on her own, taught her the habit—and that too, was a relief. It seemed to release her pent-up feelings.

She gave way then; scarcely crying, but sobbing in a sort of dry-eyed way that wracked her whole body, her hand clapped over the hurt wrist as if that were the cause of it, instead of merely the excuse for it.

Then, looking down, she saw that Kelly's ring was still upon her hand, and her sobbing ceased abruptly. Something in her

face changed; the reflection, perhaps, of some change, deep and irrevocable, in her very nature.

She forgot that her wrist was scalded, and snatched off the ring with a quick, fierce gesture; raised it, holding it poised to fling into the fire. But the intention gave way and she dropped her hands together again, and looked at the ring with sombre eyes, then drew a breath.

"No, I'll keep it as a reminder, just so as I'll be sure that never again—never again——"

She did not know whether she spoke the words, or only thought them. She knew, though, that their meaning was burning all through her.

For numbed pain was giving way to rebellion; against Kelly, against all men, against love. And she was filled with flaming resentment against the unfairness of life.

She lived through the days that followed as if she were being swept along by an irresistible tempest. She could not sit still, could not sleep at night; the slowness of her cash-desk work irked her till she wanted to scream. As she walked through the streets she moved with feverish quickness, scarcely noticing the people she passed, alive only and all the time to the passion of resentment that was consuming her.

What had she done that she should have to suffer like this? Why should it be *she* to suffer? She who had not even dreamed of wrong, whose motives had been white, whose very happiness had been so exalted?

Rebellion against it all filled her scorchingly, and she pushed her way through the ruins of her high ideals with an impetuous resentment against their ruin.

Followed a period of sheer terror, when she discovered that no matter what he was, what he had done, she loved him still; wanted him with her; his arms around her, his kisses; his voice . . . his eyes. . . .

And learned then that it was possible to despise a man with her intelligence, and to thirst for him with her senses.

What if she should always feel this longing for him? Was the rest of her life to be this torture?

She felt torn all to bits, with longing and resentment pulling this way and that.

Ben, when he saw her again, scarcely recognised her as the girl he used to talk to in the work-yard. There was something so terribly grown-up about her, as if her womanhood were ruthlessly casting forth the child she used to be, and setting something fierce and bitter and disillusioned in the child's place. The starry eyes looked at him stormily now; the soft feminine lips had taken on a harder line; the radiant, uplifted beauty that her love had called into being had turned into a beauty which was perhaps more splendid, but which Ben found not nearly so wonderful.

All the same, it gave him something like a thrill of satisfaction to see it, for he had never believed in Kelly.

It was several weeks before she could give him the whole story; at first she could only tell him the bare facts; shortly, abruptly, with the quick injunction that he was never to speak of it again.

But later she gave him all of it, over tea one day, with the peculiar unreserve that came natural between them, and when he began offering sympathy, stopped him quickly.

"Don't pity me," she commanded sharply. "I won't be pitied. I'm not pitying myself, and I won't have anyone else pity me."

"Then I'll say what I really think, which is that you're *lucky*," answered Ben.

"To have found out that he's a rotter? Lucky? Oh, yes—*very* lucky," she said bitterly. "But why should I have had to find out that he's a rotter? Why should a rotter have been sent to me to love? Why couldn't he have been all I thought he was?"

"Because no man could be all that, I suppose," he said.

"That's just it, and *that's* all the luck there is to it. That I've learnt what men are. That I'm cured of thinking they could ever be anything else, and that I'll know better than to trust another man as long as I live. If you could have heard what he used to say, about marrying and all that. . . . If you could know what he seemed like to me. What I thought of him. . . . How sure I was of him. . . . And now . . . I look back and remember and I know that there's scarcely a

word he ever said to me that wasn't a lie. He lied with everything he did and said."

"You've just got to cut him out, Hetty."

"Cut him out? You don't need to advise me to do that. I've cut him out all right. Only why should I *have* to cut him out? Why should it be my luck? That's what gets me, and makes me want to hit out at someone. It isn't fair when I haven't done anything bad. It isn't fair, Ben; there's something wrong with it all, when things like this are allowed to happen. Why couldn't they just happen to bad people? Why should it happen to me, when I never meant any wrong . . . ?"

She badly needed this outlet of words, for she had not been able to speak of it at all to anyone else, and with his boyish instinct for true companionship, he let her do the thing she needed until she had nearly talked herself out.

Then he said:

"It never seems to me it's any good resenting things. For one thing, we don't understand the way things work. Seems to me," he added this slowly, as if he were searching his own mind, not quite sure of what he might find, "that all anyone can do is just go on having faith."

"Faith," She caught up the word fiercely. "It's just having faith that's done all the harm. Didn't I have faith in Nicko? Didn't I believe in him till I *couldn't* have believed even *this*, if I hadn't seen him turn tail and run at the sight of his wife? Faith! Its just having faith that's done it."

She caught her breath.

"I don't mean faith in a man," he said, still slowly. "There's another sort of faith."

"Faith in God? Well, if there's a God, why does He let things like this happen?"

"And I don't mean that exactly, either. . . . But if you can have faith. . . ."

She broke in:

"I can't ever have faith again. Having faith is too dangerous."

"No, it isn't. It's the only safe thing there is."

"What sort of faith, anyway?" she cried.

"Just faith in everything being right and coming right, even

if you can't see how. The sort of faith Browning meant when he says he marches breast forward and knows that right must conquer."

"But right isn't conquering. Nick's a liar, and he's faithless, but *he* isn't being made to suffer. He gets off scot-free. You can't call that right conquering," put in Hetty violently. "It's all very well for you to talk, Ben, but you haven't loved a person that's let you down like this. You can just go on in your plane-sailing way, and never feel anything particular, year in and year out. It's all very well to talk about having faith when you've never been given any reason for *not* having it. When I think of how I tried and tried to be good enough for Nicko! How I read up about manners and things, so's I could be on a level with him!"

She laughed hardly; a most unmirthful sound it was.

Ben put down his teacup and rose. She couldn't see his face as he turned away from the table and said abruptly:

"Let's go for a walk."

"Oh, Ben," she cried, half-irritated, half-laughing again—a better laugh this time. "I believe if the sky was to be falling in little bits all around you, you'd say let's go for a walk, or let's have tea, or let's—— something that's stodgy."

For all that, she went out with him, and they walked about the sunshiney streets, talking when they felt inclined; and the exercise did her good.

They were on there way home again when he said suddenly:

"It doesn't seem to me it's ever a bit of good trying to make yourself good enough for someone else. You've got just to make yourself good enough for *you*."

"No one'll ever make *me* try to be good enough for them again. I know that," answered Hetty.

"Well then, that's another thing that's lucky about all this. You'll be a lovely woman one day, Hetty, when this soreness has worn off."

"I'll be—— Well, what d'you take me for now—a child?" cried Hetty.

"No," he said. "I didn't mean that. No, confound that fellow, you're not a child any more." He said that as if to

himself, and walked on rather quicker, as he might have walked if he had been alone. She half-ran a few steps, and caught up.

"You're right, Ben, I'm not a child any more," she said more quietly than she had spoken that afternoon.

At the side door of the little oil-shop he said good-bye.

"Aren't you coming in again?" she asked.

"No. Give my love to Sal."

He held out his hand and took hers.

"You say you'll never believe in any man again," he said slowly. "You believe in *me,* don't you?"

"Why, yes, of course, I believe in *you.* You aren't a man."

He dropped her hand.

"What am I, then?" he demanded.

"You're just Ben. Just a boy."

"Well, go on believing in *me,* anyway," he said, after a moment. "It's better for you to believe in a *boy* than not to believe in anything. Good-night, Hetty."

And he turned and strode along the street away from her.

A few days later as Hetty was leaving Fontaine's shop, she felt a tug at her sleeve and a hand round her arm.

Turning swiftly, she found herself face to face with Nickolas Kelly.

For a moment things seemed to spin, then she tried to shake her arm free, but he held fast.

"Hetty," he cried, "I've got to see you, somewhere where we can talk. I've got to. Oh, Hetty, if you knew what I'm going through."

She refused sharply; but her eyes were caught and held by something desperate, rather dreadful, in his face. He clung to her arm, with both hands now, utterly regardless of the inquisitive looks of passers-by.

She refused again; but he was insistent and wouldn't let her go.

At last she said, for she felt, by this time, that all the eyes in London were witnessing the scene:

"Very well. Only for a minute though."

And with her heart hitting her ribs, she allowed him to take her to an obscure little tea-shop, and to guide her to a table

set in a discreet nook. For form's sake he ordered tea, and when it was set before them, she turned to him and said:

"Well?"

"Hetty, I've suffered the tortures of the damned since I saw you!" he broke out.

"Have you?" she said, more calmly than she felt. For his nearness still had the power to stir her.

"For God's sake don't speak so coldly."

"How do you expect me to speak to you, Nick?" she answered. Her eyes with that new hardness in them, met his levelly.

"Oh, I know what you must think of me. I know; but Hetty, I did it because I loved you so——"

"Loved!"

"I swear that's true. I couldn't bear the thought of losing you."

"And was it because you couldn't bear the thought of losing all those others that made you deceive them too?"

"Oh, every man has his experiences——"

"You told me I was the first."

"And every man says that, too."

"When he has a wife at home?"

"Hetty, don't be so unkind; can't you make any allowances for a poor devil who's crazy about you? You used not to be so hard on me."

"I believed in you not so very long ago."

"You can believe in me with ten times the reason now. I swear you can. I'm just mad for you. Can't sleep, can't think, can't eat. I'm just mad for you. Hetty, suppose I *did* let you think I was free, it was only because I loved you. I'm crazed with longing for you. Hetty, I swear that's true. Can't you believe me?"

He was leaning towards her, so close that his shoulder touched hers, and she scanned his face with bitter eyes. How could he dare to make love to her again? To try to foist his lies upon her again? But reading his face with those disillusioned eyes of hers, she suddenly realised that what he was saying was the truth. She found herself looking into the face of a man who was enduring all the hells of baffled passion—for her. He had been caught this time.

And looking into his tortured eyes, something of the hot resentment against life's unfairness died down in Hetty's breast. Perhaps after all, poetic justice was not so completely lacking from the eternal scheme of things as it had seemed to be.

"Yes," she said, slowly, "I believe you, Nicko. But what difference does that make?"

He leaned nearer still.

"I'm ready to chuck everything and go away with you, Hetty," he said in a low voice. "I don't care what sacrifices I have to make; I'm ready to make 'em for you. I'm blind mad for you."

She moved back from him and, leaning, he followed her. She didn't touch him, but she said:

"Keep away from me, Nick!" in a way that made him obey.

"Darling, don't play with me. You love me and I love you. I know I haven't been fair to you, but I will be in future. You'll never regret it, Hetty; I'll never let you. I'll be just your devoted lover all the days of my life. What do conventions count against the happiness of two people who really love each other—who were simply made for each other?"

"You don't love me, Nick," she said quietly. "Love isn't that—that thing that's in your eyes when you look at me."

He protested, he pleaded, he cajoled, but she only shook her head.

"It's—it's like you, Nick, to ask such a thing of me. You always think you've only got to ask, to get, don't you? I ought to be furious, and so I am, in a way, but mostly I just feel it isn't worth being furious about; it's just like you, that's all, and you're so—so sort of small now."

He stared at her unbelievingly.

"Hetty! You don't really mean that? Have you forgotten all that we have meant to each other?"

"No."

"Have you forgotten the things you've said to me?"

"No."

"Is it just the conventions that worry you? Darling, they don't count, these days. My wife will divorce me; I'll make her, and we'll be married as soon as possible. No one thinks anything of it nowadays. I swear I'm dead on the level about it. I'll marry you, Hetty."

"But I won't marry you, Nick. I wouldn't if we could do it straight as a die—not now I know what you are."

"But, Hetty, I'm utterly wretched without you!"

"Then, you'll have to be wretched, that's all. And I'm not going to talk about it any more. I'm going. Don't come with me. I'm leaving the bill to you this time."

She got up abruptly, because her voice was shaking badly, and went out, leaving him to stare after her with incredulous eyes.

But Kelly didn't give up entirely. He was going through a really bad time, and he wasn't the type to go through a bad time meekly or with dignity.

He haunted Fontaine's so that Hetty went to the shop in the dread of seeing him, and left the shop in the absolute certainty that he would be waiting for her. It was in vain she begged him to leave her in peace. He couldn't. And life became a new sort of misery to Hetty.

He continued to see her and to plead with her, even to threaten her, and then to threaten to hurt himself.

"I'll blow my brains out," he said, and for a moment fear knocked at her heart, but only for a moment; then she answered with a new cynicism that didn't really suit her.

"No, you won't. Because you know you wouldn't look pretty afterwards."

Then, several days went by and he waited in vain; the shop shutters were put up, but Hetty had not appeared. Unable to endure more than three days of this, he went into the shop and asked Monsieur Fontaine whether Miss Carol were still there.

It seemed ages before that bland, fat Frenchman answered. Then he said,

"No, Mees Carol she go an' get other work. She leave here, two, three days ago. I know nothing . . . where she go . . . or why. But she go. That is all."

CHAPTER VII

Monsieur Fontaine, when Hetty had gone to him and told him that she must go, had been loud in his protestations and persuasions: he had other plans for her.

All his life it had been his ambition to start a hair-dressing establishment in the West End that should cater mainly for women; for the women of London's highest society. All his life he had dreamed of waves, and puffs and curls and coils and all sorts of cunning devices for the decoration of woman's crowning glory. All his life he had saved for it. Only now were his savings enough. "And you," he told Hetty, as a final persuasion, "you shall be my manageress. From the moment I see you, I say to myself, yes, she is 'ere; my manageress. I shall myself dress your 'air for you; a modiste shall build your clothes; you will look. . . ."

Words failed; he bunched the tips of fingers and thumb together, and spread them again as if his hand had the power to release into the air the meaning his lips had failed to convey. Then:

"Come, I shew you," he added.

He took her into the back of the shop through the shaving department and into his own private room.

There he displayed before her three dummy heads, with simpering waxen faces, one crowned with dark, one with fair, and one with red hair. And each head was most beautifully dressed.

"My secret, eh? Bluebeard, eh? The bad man who keep 'eads in a cupboard, eh? Sit down, ma'mselle, and I show you further." He chattered, moving round busily.

Wondering a little, Hetty sat down, and he opened a three-fold mirror before her, wrapped a white sheet cloak around her shoulders, produced a brush and comb, and almost before she was aware of it, had removed her hat and was pulling the pins from her hair and letting the dusky clouds of it fall around her

shoulders. She half arose, with a movement of protest, but he stopped her.

"Wait!" he implored. "Wait! Look in the mirror. See, a great transformation! I comb it, so. I smooth it, so. I puff it, but the slightest, so, and lo, it is a work of art!"

He worked so quickly and so cleverly, and the picture in the mirror was so interesting, that Hetty forgot her protest and sat quite still beneath his fat, skilful fingers just watching; her eyes bright with wonder. For she saw that picture in the mirror slowly change from the picture of a simple, unsophisticated girl to the picture of a woman as elegant, as chic, as distinguished as any of the women beside whom she had felt so small and dowdy that evening at the Madrid. Beneath the clever manipulation of those fat, deft fingers, she saw her head gradually emerge from its customary simplicity and take on a new queenliness. A memory of what Sally had said, that she could marry a prince tomorrow, and no one would ever know that she had ever been anything but a princess, flashed into her mind, and her heart beat quicker in sudden new excitement.

"I don't believe they would," she told herself. "If I just knew some of the—the sort of trimmings of good form, I honestly don't believe they would."

All sorts of ambitions, big, bright, worldly, perhaps rather hard ambitions, were born into her scheme of life in that moment.

The discovery of them brought a flush into her cheeks, and she raised her eyes without moving her head.

"You do it—wonderfully," she said, only just aloud. Monsieur Fontaine chuckled.

"Some day you will tell it with pride that the great Fontaine has dressed your 'air," he said, a mawkish modesty being no part of his make-up. "Some day, crowned 'eads will be beneath my 'ands, and ze great Léonard, who dress ze 'air of Marie Antoinette, will turn in his tomb and call me, Brozair!" He flung out his hands to illustrate just with what warmth the great Léonard would acknowledge him.

When he finished her hair he stood surveying it proudly, his plump, smooth face showing in the mirror just above Hetty's transformed head.

"For ze beauty of Helen of Troy a t'ousand ships were

launched, but if I had arrange la belle Helène's coiffure, it would have been *ten* t'ousand ships! Now you stay, eh? We work together, you and I, eh?"

But Hetty slowly shook the transformed head, and said:

"No, I'm so sorry. There's a man—and he'll find me if I stay with you."

"Holy Blue! You tink by running away you give to men the go-by, eh? With those eyes that the good God has put into your face? Of a foolishness! You run from one man, but are there not others? And do they not run, too?"

"All the same, I must go," Hetty insisted.

For fifteen minutes Monsieur Fontaine argued, but in vain. Hetty was quite determined. He gave it up then.

"Ah, well, you go," he said, resigned and disgusted, but seeing that she was very much in earnest. "An' I get another girl, an' by gum, she shall have ze eyes like ze eyes of one dam cow, so that men shall still run, but in the opposite direction, and I shall be ruin! But still, you go. Oh, yes, you go! I give to you ze sack, see? Ze push, ze boot. And since I give no notice, I give also ze week's money."

He took the money from his purse and pressed it into her hand, and chivvied her with so much fluster and show of temper, towards the door, that she was glad to grab her coat, jam on her hat, and depart. It was only when she was half-way home that she looked down at the money in her hand, and realised how he had covered up a gracious and kindly and understanding action.

"He's an old darling," she said to herself, gratefully.

That was, in detail, how Hetty left Monsieur Fontaine, and that was why Monsieur Fontaine was so curt and non-informative when Nickolas Kelly asked him about her.

When she told Sally that she had left, Sally applauded her decision, but when she told of turning down Fontaine's offer, Sally told her, unadorned, that she was a fool. Hetty set her lips obstinately.

"It's no good, Sal," she said. "I've got to get out on my own. Do something, you know; *be* something. I've got to show Nicko I can be as fine as they were—all those grand ladies. I'll show him I can be as right, as well-dressed. I'll *behave* as smartly; I'll prove it to him."

"I thought you weren't ever going to see him any more," said Sal.

"Well, even if I don't——" The pause said the rest. What she really meant was that she had got to prove all that for *her own* satisfaction; for the satisfaction of that something in her which had been so badly humbled; that she had got to pluck the sting of that bitter evening out of her heart.

"Look at my hair, Sal," she went on, taking off her hat and displaying the new coiffure. "Old Fontaine made that of it. But he couldn't have made it if he'd had nothing to work on. See how I look? Well, that's how I was meant to look. Oh, I'm not swanking! It's there, it's in me, and I've got to give it its head."

"Well, if you took old Fontaine's job you'd have your hair done that way *all* the time. Can't see the sense of it, I can't, really, Het. You want a thing, and when it's absolutely flung at you, you turn it down!" argued Sally.

"No, I don't. If I was Fontaine's manageress, I'd wear my hair like this, and have smart clothes while I was at the shop. But I wouldn't be the real thing. The real thing'd be the people I showed into the hair-dressing parlour, and they'd look down on me. I'd go home on a bus and scrag my hair back and fry myself a sausage or an egg over the gas, and—oh, it's no good talking. I'm not *made* that way! And I've got to get out and live the way I was made to live. I don't care if I *starve* first—I'll do it in the end. Only I've got to get at it my own way."

"Something's bitten you, old dear!"

Hetty laughed.

"Maybe. But there's got to be ten thousand ships launched for *me* before I die. An' there will be—you'll see."

Sal stared.

"Het, you ain't gone and brought in a 'flu germ to make a pet of, have you?" she asked anxiously.

"No, I'm all right. That was only something old Fontaine said. I don't know what it's all about, but I know what it sort of *means,* an' it means what I mean. That's why I left old Fontaine."

"I thought you said you left him to get away from Kelly."

"So I did, too."

Sally couldn't quite follow. She started on a new tack.

"Kelly knows this address, don't he?" she asked.

Hetty looked at her quickly.

"So he does," she said thoughtfully. "I'll have to clear out."

"Leave me?"

"I'll have to."

"Hetty!"

"Well, I am sorry, Sal. But we can't have him hanging round here."

"No. But—oh, well, that's always the way. Just as you get fond of anything, or used to anything, it goes."

"I'm sorry, Sal," said Hetty again. "But something's happened. I can't explain. I think it really happened when dad married Mrs. Dowse. I don't know how to say it, but things have all gone snap. If you can't understand, I'm sorry; because I can't make it any clearer. . . . I've just got to cut out everything . . . and start a new way. . . ."

There was a considerable silence.

Then Sal said heavily:

"All right. Where'll you go?"

"I'll have to think. Right in London, perhaps."

Sal turned away, then back again.

"Ben Jones'll not approve of that, I should think," she said,.

"Ben isn't my keeper."

"No." Sal turned away again, and this time didn't turn back immediately. "But he'd like to be, wouldn't he?"

"How d'you mean?"

"Well, he's a bit fond of you, isn't he?"

"Yes—so am I of him."

"No, not that, I didn't mean. Wouldn't he like to be your keeper for keeps? *Marry* you, Hetty?"

"He's never said so. Oh—not seriously, I mean."

"Hasn't he?"—a touch of eagerness in that.

"No, not seriously. Once, ages ago, when I was miserable about Mrs. Dowse, but he didn't mean anything."

"Sure?"

"Course I'm sure. Anyway, it 'ud have to be some man considerably more than Ben to make me think of marrying anyone. You might know that, I should think. I've thought of marrying

once, and that's enough. That once has taught me—for life. Ben's only a boy."

"Ben's a dear."

"Well, I never said different. Only he's not the kind anyone 'ud think of marrying."

"Some might," said Sal, her face still averted.

"Good luck to them, then." Hetty was not at the moment interested in Ben.

"Good luck to them!" repeated Sal slowly.

The following day Hetty started her search for rooms. For various reasons the idea of living in London itself began to appeal to her more and more strongly. London, with its moving multitudes, she had always heard, was about *the* best place in the world to hide in. Apart from that, there was adventure in London, and if a new ambition was tugging at one of her sleeves, its twin, a new sense of adventure, was tugging at the other. So it was in London that she searched.

No need to follow her into the rooms she did not take. She found the ones she *did,* at six o'clock on the evening of the third day—the very day that Kelly was enquiring for her at M'sieur Fontaine's—up at the top of a house in a narrow foreign-looking street off Soho.

Her landlady was Italian; dark-haired, dark-eyed, intelligent, kindly, with the glimpse of a twinkle about her that suggested that she must have been a merry-hearted girl. Her husband managed a restaurant which covered two rooms on the street level and two on the first story; and she managed her husband. The rooms above, she occupied with her family; the two little rooms she was letting to Hetty, were just so much waste space.

All this "Madame" Gandini volubly explained in expressive broken English. She was a busy, happy little woman and Hetty liked her. Somehow, although at first glance they looked unpromising enough, she also liked the two rooms. She was tired of walking about, the rooms were going very cheap, this dark, not quite pretty little woman looked hospitable and homely.

"All right," said Hetty, "I'll have the rooms."

They were on their way downstairs again—moving through

a nearly overpowering odour of Italian cooking that was on its way up—when Hetty halted and said:

"I'm out of work."

Madame—she was always known as madame—halted too, and they looked at each other.

"Then how you pay?" she asked, with simplicity.

"I shall get work."

"And if you don't-a?"

"Then I can get out."

"No," said Madame laconically, "you help-a in the kitchen."

"Yes," answered Hetty eagerly. "I could do that. Is that a bargain, then? If I cannot pay for my rooms, I work for them?" Madame laughed, and her black eyes shone merrily. She answered Hetty's question by leaning over the banisters and calling to her husband.

"The rooms are let, 'Cesco."

Francesco Gandini, from the regions below, sent up a reply in quick Italian.

"I'm so grateful," said Hetty, "I can't tell you——"

Madame shrugged her shoulders.

"I get much work out of your one pair of hands, think," she said. "I make-a you earn your roof."

They parted at the side door, after arranging that Hetty should take possession next day.

Hetty went back to Sal.

Sal greeted her with the news that when she came back from work she had found Kelly outside the little oil shop.

"I didn't know who he was, of course, but when he saw me come in at the door, he spoke to me and asked if you were in. An' I says you weren't. And he says, when would you be? And I says, never—you'd left. An' he says where'd you gone? And I says I didn't know—which was no lie. And he went off, looking like—oh, I don't know what." Sally broke off breathlessly.

"How'd he look?" asked Hetty, her lips a little tense.

"Miserable—and all worked up."

"Miserable? Well, I guess it's his turn!" Sally looked at her a minute, then she said slowly:

"I don't know what you meant when you spoke about launch-

ing ten thousand ships, but if you ain't been and launched ten thousand devils in that man's heart, my name ain't Sally Silver, so help me."

Hetty did not, after all, have to help in the Gandini kitchen. Rather to Madame's secret disappointment—help in the kitchen was not easy to get—she found another job. Not a very well paid job, but a new one. She became a programme girl at the Harlequin Theatre.

The Autumn season at the Harlequin was being run by a band of rather high-brow, but very earnest, actors, authors, artists, and so on; anyone sincerely interested in the art of the theatre—apart from its box office significance—was welcome to work for the Harlequin Company of players. Actors who were filled with latent greatness, but had never been given a chance, were to find that chance at the Harlequin. Authors whose plays were among the "great un-acted" were to have those plays produced. As for the financial side, that was to be run on Commonwealth lines. These schemes rarely pay their way, but their promoters always think they are going to, and the Harlequin Theatre was buzzing like a hive when Hetty went in, purely on chance, to see if she could sell programmes.

She could. The Harlequin Company would be only too pleased if she would. She was engaged to do so, in a most unbusiness-like, but rather attractive way. Rita West, a short, square girl with bright red hair bobbed into an aureole round her head, interviewed her up in the sheet-enshrouded dress circle. There was a rehearsal in progress and the red-haired girl explained that she was not only acting an important part, but was stage-manager too, and therefore most *frightfully* busy. Hetty told her what she wanted. The red-haired girl said:

"Yes . . . I see . . . well . . ." and seeing a man passing just outside one of the exits, she called out:

"Oh, I say, here's a very jolly looking girl wants to sell programmes. I think we'd better let her, don't you?"

To which the man answered, merely in passing:

"Yes, rather."

So that was that.

Hetty was quite excited about this new job, and it seemed to her ages before the first night came and her duties began.

The first night was a moderate success. Hetty, in a blue frock with a big blue bow in her hair, got through her new duties creditably, and her eyes were shining with interest in the people of the audience. The stalls were patronised by the most extraordinary mixture she had ever seen. The smartest of evening confections were sitting side by side with grey sweaters, and tweed skirts; the most politely supercilious expressions were cheek by jowl with horn-rimmed spectacles and intensity.

During the intervals, phrases reached her. . . .

"So true. . . ." "Vital. . . ." "Quite amusing. . . ." "Not so bad," "So *dynamic*." Hetty treasured that word and wondered what it meant. And at the end, the play was applauded, voted clever, and the author, Edmund Shale, was called.

Hetty watched him make his speech of thanks, and his bow, and his little nervous smile, and liked the look of him. She applauded with the rest and had a pleasurable feeling of having shared in the general success of the evening.

One evening she was standing in her accustomed place in the dimness at the back of the dress circle watching the third act when a little bit of dialogue from the stage came through to her as if it were something she'd never heard before. It seemed suddenly to strike a responsive chord in her, or to touch some spot of understanding in her brain that in three weeks of constantly hearing it, it had never found before.

One of the characters had to say:

"People of to-day don't know what they want; they only know that they want it so infernally badly that they can't rest."

And another character answered:

"That is because instead of being religious, we modern people have become merely stylish."

At that, the theatre, stage, audience, everything was blotted out, and she was back again at the Madrid, faced with a pink decoction in a fluted shell, and her own utter ignorance as to how to deal with it. And she saw Kelly's handsome, sulky face opposite her, and the look of angry horror that crossed it when, in her desperation, she emptied the shell upon her plate. The pictures flashed across her memory and faded, and she was thinking now,

that with all sorts of sins against God on his laden conscience, Nickolas Kelly could still feel that blazing horror at her sin against style.

The memory and the revelation that the stage words brought to her were so vivid that, unconscious that she spoke aloud, she said in a quick whisper:

"That's true—that's absolutely true!"

"What's true?" said a quiet voice beside her. She turned quickly, to find Edmund Shale standing beside her.

A trifle disconcerted she whispered back:

"That about religion and being stylish."

The author looked at her curiously through the half-light.

"D'you understand it?" he asked

"I don't know. But I've been through it."

"Been through it? Been through *what?*"

"Through what your people mean."

"How do you know what they mean?"

"I've been through it."

He laughed softly.

"We're going round in circles," he said.

The curtain rustled down to half-hearted applause. After three weeks run the success of the play was beginning to dwindle.

"They've never been through it, evidently." said Shale, indicating his enemy, the audience. And he escaped just as the lights went up.

But in the darkness of the last act Hetty found him beside her again.

"Come and have a cup of coffee with me after the show?" he suggested.

"No," said Hetty shortly.

"Why not?"

"Because you only ask me to because you think that as I'm only a programme girl you may."

"I asked you because you understood, that's all. But don't, if you'd rather not."

"Why don't you ask everyone in the audience that understood then?"

"Shall I? But they'd all say they understood. If I could look

into their minds and see the truth, though, I believe I'd lose just the price of one coffee—yours."

"How can I understand better than they?"

"I'd be interested to know that. You must, or why shouldn't they have all understood so poignantly that they had to say it was true, just as you did?"

"Perhaps they haven't been through it."

"That's just it, and there we are back at the beginning again, having danced completely round the conversational mulberry bush. Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Coffee, or not?"

She scanned his face through the darkness—then:

"Coffee," she said, coming to a quick decision.

"Thank you very much," he answered, accepting the tribute of her judgment.

When later they met again outside the theatre, his first words were:

"You might have warned me that you are beautiful."

"I'm not."

"You are."

"Go on!" she said incredulously.

"I'm going on," he answered, with a laugh, "and you're coming with me. Isn't that rather nice?"

"It's not so bad," said Hetty cautiously.

They crossed the busy stretch of Shaftesbury Avenue, cut through a narrow turning, and came out into Greek Street.

"You certainly might have warned me," he said again. "Beauty always bowls me over so."

"You don't look very bowled over."

"I am, though."

"Why?"

"Because there's still something in me that is unfashionable enough to feel impelled to worship."

"Religion?" she asked.

"Or just beauty, perhaps," he answered.

"Not being stylish, anyway," she said, with a laugh, not altogether sure of the meaning of what she said, but remember-

ing its place in that little bit of dialogue that had led to this adventure.

"Style's all right, kept in its place."

"What is its place?"

"The surface of things. That's why it changes from day to day. And that's why people are restless. A surface, without good, honest substance beneath, is no good to anyone."

"Oh," said Hetty and they walked on in silence.

"Is religion and beauty the same then?" she asked.

"So mixed up that they are difficult to distinguish."

"But not just a beautiful face," she persisted, thinking again of Kelly.

"Beauty isn't so limited. There's the beauty of the world and the sky and the sun and the moon and the stars; and of men and of women. And of the things they make and of the things they do. And of ideals, and conduct, and endeavour; of work and of play. Of youth and age; of friendship and love . . ."

"Not love," said Hetty, catching a breath.

He looked at her; then:

"But the greatest of all is the beauty of truth," he said.

"Truth *hurts*—awfully sometimes," she cried. "Oh, if you didn't have to *know* things you could go on being happy."

"No, you couldn't; you could go on being deceived. But that's quite a different thing."

"It doesn't always pay, anyway; truth doesn't. I told the truth to a man once, and it didn't pay."

"What did you tell him?"

She laughed hardly.

"I don't see why I should let you into it, but I told him I loved him, if you want to know."

"And it didn't pay?"

"No."

He stopped suddenly, and glancing up, she saw that they were standing in front of Gandini's restaurant.

"Why, you've brought me home!" she exclaimed.

"Have I? I was going to introduce to you Madame's coffee. The best in London, without any exception whatever."

"But I live up there—right at the top."

"Then you probably know the coffee?"

She nodded, and they went in together.

That meeting with Edmund Shale changed the aspect of life for Hetty a good deal. His acquaintances were many and varied and finding her interested in everything, he shared them with her.

She had not often been in the Gandini's restaurant, and knew very little about it. Now she discovered that it was quite a favourite haunt of all sorts of people of the lesser "Bohemian" circles.

There were artists, writers, poets, actors, socialists, and food faddists. There were several artist's models, two stage-costume designers, one authority on décor, another on lighting effects, another on dyeing. There were girls who ran teashops, girls who made blouses, chorus girls, girls who danced, girls who sang, girls who did nothing but look decorative and smoke cigarettes.

They were all very willing to hail Hetty as one of the flock, but she was too shy to answer the hail with readiness. She could get on easily with one person at a time; but these people always seemed to be together; they were so much "the crowd" that she could scarcely imagine individual existences among them. So she was always apart from them; looking on; hardly ever speaking unless she was directly challenged and then, mostly, she found that words would only come stutteringly. She could not achieve the "crowd" feeling within herself; that feeling which seemed to enable them all to talk at once and to enjoy doing it. She could only talk when she was sure of getting individual response. But if she could never feel that she fitted this world, it was a new world and therefore interesting; and if she heard a tremendous lot of art jargon talked, she also heard some very sound sense.

Edmund Shale, she discovered presently, was also not entirely of them. He also remained slightly apart; always a little aloof. And that, she discovered, was the point at which he and she met.

He was interested in Hetty; decent in outlook, straight in intention; of loftly ideals—a bit of a dreamer, therefore—sensitive, understanding. And with it all, distant, unemotional, analytic. That suited Hetty; after Nickolas Kelly, that was just what she wanted.

She soon felt quite at ease with Shale. He and Ben were the only men to be allowed up in her little sky-high room over the restaurant,—only she never regarded Ben as quite a man. She

could talk to him; there was no one she could talk to with the same freedom with which she could talk to Ben, but she seemed to be passing him; growing out of him, as it were, leaving him behind. The last year had been so full of changes for her, while he had just quietly moved from his work to an architect's office and was putting in the same patient plodding at the office that he had put in at the stoneyard. He plodded with exasperating thoroughness; as if he felt that he had all eternity to spare. And nothing she could say could flick him into changing.

Yet there was no one who occupied just the place in her life that he did; and no one, not even Kelly, who had had the power to challenge the place he held.

For one thing, he was a link with Penbury and Bella. And that meant an enormous lot to her. She looked forward to hearing his report of how things were going in Tag Street; of how Bella was looking; of how she seemed to be in health and mood and manner, more than she looked forward to anything else, and his weekly Sunday visit was an event she would not have dreamed of missing.

Up to this time, his reports had not varied.

He didn't have much time to keep a watch on the family at 39 Tag Street, but he did make a point of seeing Bella as often as he could, so that he could carry first hand news of her to Hetty. It was not a job he cared for; he frankly disliked Bella. Her prettiness was of the kind that made no appeal to him; her manner and conversation left him utterly unresponsive; he could see none of the qualities in her that Hetty saw; and could make none of the excuses for her that Hetty made. He did not believe that her faults were entirely due to Mrs. Carol's influence; he believed that what was wrong with Bella was, chiefly, Bella. But he did not say so to Hetty. It was too difficult to say; besides he might be wrong. And anyway he didn't think Hetty would listen, and was sure she would not believe. So he carried his reports which up to this time were generally told in the words:

"Everything seems to be going on just the same."

But now he began to hint that things were different. Just what the difference was he could not say, but he had met Mr. Carol, and had thought him nervous and worried; especially when he was with his wife.

"I couldn't help thinking that perhaps they'd begun to quarrel," he told Hetty.

"And Bell?" she asked quickly.

"She seemed a bit—peevish," he said slowly. "A bit discontented . . ."

"She's beginning to realize!" cried Hetty eagerly. "I always knew she would! I shall have her here with me, Ben . . . I'll manage to keep her somehow . . . I don't care if I *starve* . . ." She laughed a touch excitedly. "So long as I can get her away from Mrs. Carol . . . I can easily fix up a little bed for her in my room . . . And . . ."

"Mind you," cautioned Ben. "I'm only guessing . . . Don't rush things."

"I won't. But I know your guessing is right. I've always *known* she'd realize . . ." And she went on planning happily.

Ben was rather troubled; he was afraid he had set hopes in motion that might not be realizable . . . However, Hetty promised not to do anything in a hurry, and she kept her promise.

And then one day, quite unexpectedly, she saw Mrs. Carol again.

CHAPTER VIII

It was a cold day, a few weeks before Christmas. Hetty was walking down Shaftesbury Avenue, when, like a sudden vision from a bad dream, she saw the large red face of Mrs. Carol. Her heart seemed to turn right over, and her first impulse was to run before Mrs. Carol saw her. But that was only the echo of the fear she used to feel for her stepmother; and she realized, next moment, that it *was* only an echo; no longer a real fear; and kept straight on.

She saw, now, that Mrs. Carol was not alone; she was with a young man. Their arms were linked, their shoulders pressed close together, and they were walking slowly towards Hetty, in a curious slack, yet careful way, which she did not yet recognise as a symptom of intoxication.

The young man was tall, loosely built, and, his hat being at the back of his head, a big curl of yellow hair quiffed up from his forehead. His face was pink and rather spotty; he had protruding, pale eyes, and a dissolute mouth.

Mrs. Carol, her face very red, her large hat not too precisely centred, was laughing sillily. There was, apart from the linked arms, an air of indefinable familiarity between them.

Then as Hetty approached, Mrs. Carol pulled herself up short, snatched her hand from her companion's arm, gave him a push, said something in his ear, and he did a disappearing act round the corner of Wardour Street just as Hetty came up.

Hetty, instinctively braced for battle, confronted Mrs. Carol.

Mrs. Carol looked at Hetty with rather bleared, uncertain eyes; and blinked; then smiled fatuously; then, most surprisingly, said:

" 'Ere we are again," and added, "comenavadrink, lovey."

"Come and . . . what?" asked Hetty, completely taken aback by this greeting.

"Well, tea then, dearie. Tea's a drink ain't it? Tea's what I meant and what I'se fairly gaspin' for."

"I don't very much want tea," objected Hetty. "It's only three . . . Besides . . ." She was passing on when Mrs. Carol laid a hand on her arm.

"Now don't be catty; I've a lot of troubles to talk to you about. Such a lot of troubles, lovey. 'Ome troublesh, and they's the worst of all, isn't they?"

Hetty impatiently shook her arm free, and Mrs. Carol did a lurch.

"Home troubles?" she asked. "About dad? Or Bella?"

"Yes about yer pore dad. Come an' drink a cup of tea . . . my expense an' all that . . . an' I'll tell you."

"Mrs. Carol," said Hetty quietly, "why are you suddenly so friendly? We weren't very friendly when we parted . . ."

"Why, lovey, you took it all the wrong way. I never meant no harm. A more kind 'earted lady never lived than what I am. Too kind; that's what I am. Too kind. I let's me 'eart run away with me 'ead. Anyone can make a mug of me. I'm that kind 'earted. Kind 'earted to a fault, that's what I am . . ."

This kind of thing rambled on and on for some time in a silly, drivelling way that seemed to Hetty to be without point or reason. But the hint of home troubles made her say:

"Very well, we'll go and have tea. Where shall we go?"

"Leave the choice to you, lovey . . . Somewhere where it's nice an' warm. Somewhere where the flies go in the winter time, if you know what I mean."

Mrs. Carol waved her hands vaguely and in turning she stumbled and grabbed Hetty's sleeve, and then put her hand through Hetty's arm, and clung rather weightily.

"But weren't you with a friend?" asked Hetty.

Mrs. Carol dismissed the friend into thin air, with a vague gesture of the hand.

" 'S gone, lovey. Don't want him, do we? Just you an' me, ain't it? Cos we want to have a regular heart to heart, don't we?"

She clung tighter and rather more heavily, and Hetty was glad to turn into a little tea shop and deposit her burden into a plush-covered seat in one corner of a quiet room.

There Mrs. Carol sat slackly, staring with stupid eyes before her. A waitress came for her order. She said something rather rambling. The girl smiled significantly and turned to Hetty. Hetty ordered tea, and because of the significance of that smile, turned sharply and looked at her stepmother.

Mrs. Carol was fumbling with her gloves, muttering to herself. Understanding began to dawn in Hetty's mind. When tea came she poured it out and Mrs. Carol said:

"Put a 'ead to it, lovey," and laughing huskily, she jerked Hetty's arm up, so that the tea was spilt.

Hetty gave her a cup of tea and moved along the red plush seat away from her; the vague understanding was becoming horrified certainty now.

Mrs. Carol picked up her cup and blew across the top of it, laughing again, uncontrolledly; then, seeing Hetty's expression, said hastily:

"S'all right, lovey. I was born in the village of Allsopp, I was, an' you gets into the 'abit of blowin' it, there . . ." And out burst that husky laugh again.

"You're tipsy," said Hetty, voice and eyes horrified.

"Tipsy? Me? When I ain't so much as seen the shadder of a sozzle all day? You to say a thing like that to me! Enough to break a lady's 'eart . . ."

The moans in this strain went on, getting louder and louder all the time, till Hetty said: "Hush, keep quiet. Just tell me what the home troubles are and get it over quick." She didn't know what to do. Her experience of life had not so far included the management of those who look upon the wine when it is red, and her horrified imagination pictured all sorts of terrifying possibilities. But she wanted to know what the home troubles were.

"Troubles. No one don't know what troubles is till they've been a pore weak widder lady same as what I've been, an' him with all that money, sudden and unexpected like and not a penny piece can I get out of him, the mean little rat. But I will. Oh, yes I will, and Charlie'll help me . . ."

Mrs. Carol broke off there, a tipsy cunning suddenly glinting in her eyes. She had gone further than she had meant to, and was controlled enough to know it and pull up short.

"Who's Charlie?" asked Hetty.

"A gentleman friend of mine," said Mrs. Carol.

"That yellow-haired young man you were with just now?" demanded Hetty.

Mrs. Carol became conciliating again.

"There now, lovey, you musn't go and think anything about 'im and me. A real gentleman, 'e is. An' knows how to treat a lady. The soul of honour; 'e is, I assure you. Anyway, you'd never go an' think things of me, would you? A respectable married lady what's been a widder an' all? No one can't say nothink against my character."

She broke off again.

"I'm not saying anything against you," said Hetty disgustedly.

"No, no, of course not. Wimmin of the world, ain't we, lovey. Real wimmin of the world . . . That's why I wanted to have a talk with you . . . Reg'lar heart-to-heart, you know, ducks. When I see you had spotted me with Charlie . . . I says to myself, reg'lar wimmin of the world, she an' me . . . lil heart-to-heart s'all that's needed put everything perfectly straight . . ."

"Why should I care who you go out with? It's nothing to do with me."

"Why should you care? Why should anybody care . . ."

Mrs. Carol made a large and dangerous gesture with both hands, which nearly swept the tea things off the table; then she subsided into a maudlin heap and tears threatened.

"Nobody cares . . . Nobody cares . . ." she moaned huskily. "Not a soul . . . Not a dam soul . . ."

"Oh, for mercy's sake, shut up," said Hetty sharply, "and tell me what the trouble is . . ."

But Mrs. Carol was sinking into the drivelling stage now, and little that was coherent could be got out of her . . .

Hetty, by dint of shakings and questions, did manage to get a few disjointed phrases from her, which, as far as she could make out, went something like this:

"Can't a woman 'ave a friend without a 'ubbub bein' made . . .? Such a lot of scandal-mongering cats . . . To set on a pore, weak woman . . . Where's justice, I arst you? Where is it? Nowhere . . . 'S gone . . ."

Tears really coursed down her red cheeks now, and Hetty

pushed her back into her corner, and leaned forward to shield her from the room.

"Well?" she said, "get on with it . . . What are the troubles?"

"Troubles? Oh, yes, troubles . . . All that money . . . and not a penny piece can I get out of him . . . Isn't that troublesh enough, ducks? But see 'ere, lovey . . ." With an effort Mrs. Carol gathered her clouding senses, and waved an impressive, weak-thumbed hand. "See 'ere, lovey . . . Keep a still tongue in your head . . . 'bout Charlie and all that . . . dear feller, Charlie . . . one of the best . . . And you shan't suffer . . . I'll see to that . . . I'll wheedle it out of 'im . . . Trust me . . . Lou Dowse ain't one to go back on 'er word . . . Soul of honour, Lou Dowse is . . . Suddenly wallowin' in gold, ducks; *wallowin'* in it . . . An' not a penny piece to his lawful wife . . . Justice! I arsk you . . . Where is it? 'S gone, lovey, 's gone . . ."

Tears gushed afresh, but Hetty let them gush. She was beginning to see daylight. Incredible daylight, it seemed, and yet it was the only gleam in sight.

Her father had somehow got some money; was suddenly "wallowing in gold." Her poor little, over-worked father . . . incredible! And yet here was Mrs. Carol drunkenly bribing her with it, to keep quiet about having seen her with that yellow-haired young man.

"Thousands and thousands, ducks," the husky voice mumbled on. "An' me 'is lawful wife aving to borrer the price of me fancy from a gentleman friend . . ."

"D'you mean that *dad's* got thousands?" asked Hetty. "*My* dad? D'you mean that? I can't believe it!"

Mrs. Carol suddenly drew herself up.

"If you're meaning to implicate as I'm a liar," she said with profound dignity . . . "All I can say is as you're one yourself . . . Only as to letting such words pass my lips, I wouldn't so demean myself . . ."

"I'm not saying anything of the sort," said Hetty quickly. "I was just utterly astonished . . ."

" 'Stonished? So was I, ducks . . . You could'a knocked me down with a fevver, you could really, lovey . . . So sud-

den it came . . . Rich old aunt . . . what he'd forgotten all about . . .” The husky voice trailed. The little spurt of coherence was fading . . . the rest was mere ramble.

It was with acute relief that, some fifteen minutes later, Hetty saw the yellow-haired Charlie dodging about by the doorway, evidently looking for Mrs. Carol. She paid her bill, and somehow manoeuvered the mountainous proportions of her stepmother across the room to the door, where with a thankful heart she put her into the young man's charge. Not before Mrs. Carol had effected an introduction in these words:

“Mr. Bates, lovey . . . Mr. Charlie Bates . . . My stepdaughter, Charlie; like me own, Hetty is . . .”

“Pleased to meet you, I'm sure,” said Mr. Bates.

And Hetty feeling rather sick, fled.

She had such a lot to think about that she scarcely knew where to begin.

Two things emerged from the tipsy mists of her stepmother's ramblings: one, that her father had somehow come into money: and the other, that Mrs. Carol had distinctly gone from bad to worse.

Beyond that, her mind was too confused to go; but she wanted badly to find out the truth of it all, and so on the following Sunday she went down to Tag Street to see her father. She chose a day and hour when she was most likely to find him alone, and she did find him alone. Mrs. Carol and Bella were out.

Herbert Carol was pathetically glad to see her again.

He fussed round her, looking at her with hungry eyes, making excuses to touch her hands, or her hair, or her sleeves.

He was excited, too, with a sort of burning inward excitement that made Hetty think that the story of the money which had seemed at first so utterly fantastic, might, after all, be true.

“It's good to see you again, Hetty, girl . . .” he said, when the first greetings were over. “We'll have a nice little tea together, just us two. *She* won't be in all the evening I don't suppose. . . . So I can have you to myself. . . . Suppose I pop up to Ruffle's and ask him to let me have a tin of salmon? Just friendly like, seeing it's Sunday. . . . And some biscuits? He's always ready to oblige, Ruffle is . . .”

He looked so achingly eager to do something special to em-

phasize the occasion, that Hetty agreed with enthusiasm and the suspicion of a lump in her throat. He fussed out and presently came fussing back, and went out to the kitchen and told her not to move and he'd bring tea to her. . . .

Which he presently did, and spread out the feast, and then sat down and looked at her across the laden table; his eyes lit in the way she had always so deplored, and his moustache "all quivery" with the excited shaking of his lips. He had brought in all sorts of things besides the salmon and the biscuits and she ate heartily to please him. But it was a silent tea, in spite of the excitement, for there were very definite barriers between them; old ones she knew, and some new ones she could not yet define.

Suddenly he asked:

"What made you come to see me, Hetty?" And she knew that the barriers had got to be scaled; the moment was here.

"I've seen Mrs. Carol," she said, looking into his face squarely. He seemed to wither at the mere sound of the name and laid down his fork and pushed away his plate, as if the feast had become suddenly repugnant.

"It seemed to me," went on Hetty, "that things weren't going well here."

"Well!" he cried bitterly; and there was a long silence.

"I made an awful mistake, Hetty. An awful mistake," he said presently.

"I'm afraid so, dad." She stretched out a hand and laid it on his. "Dad, is it true about your coming into money?"

He looked at her, startled.

"Who told you?" he cried.

"She did."

"Damn her! I can't keep anything from her! She goes through my pockets. . . I ain't got a soul to call my own . . . But I'm going to have this money. I *am*, so help me God." He brought down his fist on the table, and got up and walked jerkily up and down the little sitting-room. There was a bright spot of colour in each of his cheeks, and his quickly moving eyes looked almost feverish.

"I want to know about it, dad," said Hetty; and he flung himself into the chair again. . . .

"It was my Aunt Susan—your great-aunt she would be. I thought she was dead years ago. But no; she went to Australia with the young feller she married—never seen him, I haven't—and there they goes and makes a fortune, and here am I one of the lucky ones with—well, never mind how much, to my name."

There was a new, crafty look in his small, quick eyes.

"I'm not Mrs. Carol," she said, quietly.

"Well, several thousand, anyway," he conceded.

"What are you going to do with it all?"

"Do with it? Keep it from *her*, in the first place, and then enjoy myself on it. She thinks she'll get it, but she won't. Not so much as a look at it, she wont."

"Has it come to open quarrelling, dad?"

"Oh, lor', yes," he answered miserably. "Life's a perfect hell on earth. It is indeed, Het; you've no idea."

"Yes I have."

"She's going all to bits, Hetty. Too fond of a little drop of something. Many a time I've had to pretty nigh carry her . . ."

He broke off:

"But I don't care. I've got my freedom. I can live like a prince now. Do as I like. I've got the money," he added with pitiful triumph.

Hetty nodded absently; for through the tragedy of it, the squalor and hatefulness, thoughts were wreathing, trying to shape themselves.

"She ain't even faithful to me, Het," he went on, his voice almost a whine. "Always about with that yellow-haired little rip, Charlie Bates. A bad hat, if ever there was one. And getting to drink like a fish. I never knew she was fond of it. I swear I didn't. I thought she was just a happy, chummy woman what 'ud be ready for a bit of fun, and keep her side of the bargain. But she ain't. Hetty, the whole thing was the most awful mistake; biggest mistake I ever made in my life. But I'm going to shake it all off; I've got the money to do it, and I'm going to shake it all off. . . ."

Hetty watched him, only half listening, absorbed by the tragic little figure he cut, so feverishly eager for his bit of fun.

Her heart ached for him. But back of what she was feeling,

her brain was busy with those wreathing thoughts that she could not quite get into shape.

"Yes—and Het, I'll not leave you out of it. We'll have many a little spree on the quiet, you an' me. Just keeping it to ourselves. Might even have a week or two abroad, eh? What 'ud you say to a week in gay Paree?"

Heavens, how like Mrs. Carol it all sounded. Hetty roused herself almost with a shudder.

"I shan't forget you, mind you, girl," added her father.

She looked at him quietly.

"That's what Mrs. Carol said," she told him. "She said that she'd get the money away from you, and if I wouldn't say anything about seeing her with that Charlie Bates she'd not forget me. I wasn't going to tell you; but I see you know it all, and it's better to have it all out. I don't like to hear you saying the same things *she* says, somehow, dad."

"She'd no right to say it," said Mr. Carol violently. "She was promising with my money. She'd no right—"

"And you've no right, either, dad. There's the kid to be thought of—Bella."

"Bella!" he cried. "As long as she's got a lot of fussy dresses to wear, and sweets to eat, and can go to the pictures every other evening, that's all she asks. *She's* perfectly happy, don't you fret."

Hetty rose suddenly. The thoughts had taken shape; and she knew what she had come down here to say.

"Well, she hasn't got to be allowed to be happy that way. That's all there is about it," she said, with decision. "She's got to be taken out of it, see, dad? You've got the money to do it with now, and it's got to be done."

Mr. Carol was looking at Hetty with eyes that seemed to be starting out of his head. His mouth, beneath his straggly little moustache, was open; his chin dropped rather ludicrously.

"It's got to be done," he repeated blankly. "What's got to be done?"

Hetty's mind was racing now; she saw her whole plan quite clearly.

"You've got to send her to school," she said. "Some real good school; as a boarder; to live in. So that she'll be right away

from Mrs. Carol. That's what you've got to do, dad, with this money you've come into."

"I got to use my money to send that kid to school? When I ain't had so much as half a dollar to meself since the day she was born? Use *my* money *on her?* No blasted fear," he said violently.

"*You* put her under the influence of Mrs. Carol of your own free will, dad."

"Well, I've said it was a mistake. I've owned up to that, haven't I?"

"Owning up to it's no good. Saying it's a mistake isn't going to help. You've got to face the fact that it *is* a mistake and *do* something; not only talk about it."

"Well, I'm going to do something, ain't I? I'm going to have a damn good time . . . That's what I'm going to do . . ." He laughed loudly.

"You're going to get Bella out of this mess first," she answered obstinately.

He put up a fight against it; his face was quite terrible to see as he lashed out at Hetty. Refusing utterly to do as she said, just clinging with all his poor strength to his chance of freedom, willing to let Bella go to perdition so that he could snatch his bit of fun.

But Hetty listened unmoved. And—

"You've got to do it, dad," she said quietly, when he gave her a chance to speak.

After a while his tone changed. He became suppliant, pleading, almost cringing. Tears stood in his narrow eyes. Hetty pitied him through and through, even while she couldn't help a feeling of contempt. But she still listened, outwardly unmoved. The argument—if argument it could be called—moved up and down, round and round, but she insisted, and he finally collapsed beneath her insistence and gave in.

He gave her all the documents relating to his inheritance and she gathered them up with a steady hand.

"I'll find some reliable lawyer and put the whole thing in his hands," she said, "and when Bella has been looked after, you can have all the rest. *I* shan't take a farthing of it; you needn't worry about that."

She left shortly after, and as she stooped to kiss him, he said:

"You've broke my heart, Hetty. Broke it in two, you have. If you knew what it meant to me—if you knew." The tears were running down his face now, and dripping from the straggly tips of his moustache.

"Good heavens, dad!" she cried. "You ought to be only too glad that you can do something. Bella's been a nightmare to me . . . thinking of her here, with *her;* so pretty and gay-hearted, and the world so full of men . . . I've *seen* some of it, dad. I'm not a kid any longer. I've seen some of it, and I *know,* and you know too."

"Broke me heart . . . broke it in two . . ." he muttered, overwhelmed by the disaster that had befallen him.

Pity smote her and she stooped and kissed him again.

"I'm sorry, dad, I know it's tough. But you've just got to bite on it . . . bite hard enough to be glad, too. . . ." And she left him.

She sought out Edmund Shale and explained the situation to him.

"I've got to find someone who'll keep a hold on the money, so that my stepmother can't get it. Dad'll *mean* all right, when he gets over his disappointment, but he's weak—and he's miserable. So it's got to be someone I can trust."

"My brother, Robert, is the fellow for you," Edmund told her. "He wouldn't convert so much as a ha'penny postage stamp away from its lawful purpose. So utterly Robert that no one has ever been known to call him Bob."

So Shale took Hetty to his brother Robert.

Robert Shale, junior partner in the firm of Pontifex and Shale, Solicitors, was everything that Hetty required. Rather rotund, a little fussy, long-winded, and inclined to talk like an animated legal guide, he was absolutely bursting with knowledge of his business and a secret admiration for the plays of his brother Edmund. He kept the admiration secret, because his conservative soul wasn't at all sure that "Edmund ought to be encouraged," but Edmund had found him more than once, very ready to come to his assistance, when play-writing failed to produce a noticeable income.

Hetty wasn't quite sure how much she ought to tell Robert Shale, but after a few first hesitances, ended by telling him

everything. He was sympathetic and understanding and their discussion made things seem a lot easier and brighter.

"Is there nothing, Miss Carol, that you want your father to do for you?" asked Robert Shale, as she was leaving.

Hetty shook her head.

"I'm not with Mrs. Carol. I'm not under her influence."

"But there might be other considerations, things that you want."

"Oh, I shouldn't want dad to spend any of this money on *me* . . . I couldn't let him . . . It would go against my . . ." She paused again.

"Principles?" he suggested.

But that was so far from expressing what she meant, that she looked blankly at him for a moment; then said:

"Yes, I suppose so. Something, anyway . . ."

And Robert Shale understood more than he appeared to.

After this preliminary interview, Hetty took her father to the office of Robert, feeling a good deal like one who leads a lamb to the slaughter, but fortified by the conviction that this slaughter was good for this lamb.

Mr. Carol duly gave his fortune of three thousand pounds into the keeping of Robert Shale. Two thirds of it was to be devoted to Bella. The rest was to be invested for himself and paid to him in a quarterly allowance.

"Go on," he said to Hetty, with resigned bitterness. "Cook my blooming goose for me"; and he set his signature to the necessary papers.

The reflection that at least Mrs. Carol couldn't get her greedy, be-ringed hands on any of the money was the one real comfort he got from the business. And the moment when he broke the news of what he'd done to his wife was one of the sordidly big moments of his life.

He watched her fury and listened to her coarse abuse unmoved by anything except a feeling of triumph; for he hadn't even to exercise any strength against her; he hadn't even to fear that his own weakness would betray him into her hands. The whole affair was out of his control; he could just look on at her unbridled storming with the feeling that it, mercifully, had nothing to do with him any more. He wasn't even afraid of her. In

his breast pocket was the little wad of notes that represented his first allowance and gave him magic glimpses of his will-o'-the-wisp; that, and the feeling that the law was on his side, made him discover enough obstinacy in himself to enable him to keep all knowledge of the allowance from Mrs. Carol.

"Go on, my dear," he said, as the little parlour shook beneath her stamping. "Go on, get it all off your chest. And much good may it do you."

"It's that Hetty again," screamed Mrs. Carol. "If I 'adn't told her, she'd never 'ave known, and I'd 'a got the dough out of *you,* you mean little rat, you. . . I'd 'ave got it out of you, never fear."

"You shouldn't have told her then."

"If I'd bin meself, I wouldn't of. If I'd bin meself, wild 'orses wouldn't 'a dragged it from me. . ."

"Well, you weren't yourself. See? You were drunk. See? *Drunk's* what you were, and don't forget it. Perhaps it'll learn you. . ." he tormented her.

Her language, in answer, became unprintable. And when words gave out, she picked up the first thing that was within her reach, which happened to be a silver framed photograph of Charlie Bates, and flung it at him. Her aim was wild and it missed him and smashed through the window.

The sound of splintering glass snapped the apoplectic tension of her rage, and she collapsed into a chair, giving vent to alternate shrieks of laughter and blubbering sobs.

When she was well into her hysterics, Herbert Carol tiptoed to the door and left her to it.

He put on his hat and coat and went out of the house.

"Treat meself to dinner; that's what I'll do," he promised himself. "And do meself proud, too; I can afford it. . . ." A touch of swagger in that.

The photograph of Charlie Bates lay in the middle of the path; the silver frame dented in at one corner; the unpleasant pictured face smiling up at him through a web of cracked glass. It gave him peculiar pleasure to grind his heel into it, in passing.

He went up the road, the sounds of his wife's hysterics following him.

"Let her get on with it," he said to himself with grim satisfaction; and he walked a shade faster.

The sounds stopped abruptly.

"Huh, just discovered I ain't there," he diagnosed with the shrewdness of experience. "Carryin' on like that, and no one to look at her. . . ."

That gave him pleasure, too.

His hand stole to his breast pocket and closed round the little wad of notes, and he smiled beneath his straggly moustache and walked more quickly still; resolutely pursuing his will-o'-the-wisp in the face of all odds.

CHAPTER IX

To Hetty's relief, Bella was highly excited at the idea of having a lot of money spent on her, and wholly amenable to all the plans that were being made for her. First of these was that she should remove immediately to the little rooms in Soho, and she was glad enough to do that, because Mrs. Carol had very definitely "turned against her." Mrs. Carol had called her "an ungrateful little cat what was taking her lawful rights away from her," and Bella, quite forgetful that she had once regarded her stepmother as the great dispenser of good times, had retorted, with her head in the air:

"Huh, I'm going to be made a lady of, which is what *you'll* never be . . ." And that had not improved things for her.

Her father, too, found it difficult to look upon her with toleration. She had cost him too much.

The selection of a school for her had been referred by Robert Shale to Harriet, his wife. Two conscientious souls, their discussions were earnest and lengthy.

Bella was taken by Hetty to see Mrs. Shale, and with that instinct for adaptability for which the female of the species is justly more famous than the male, she behaved with great decorum, and quite won Mrs. Shale's sympathy.

If neither her grammar nor manner were perfect, she looked bewitchingly pretty, and managed to achieve a demureness which Mrs. Shale later described as evidence of "an instinct for refinement."

Mrs. Shale hustled, and it was finally settled that Bella should go to Miss Crossley's School for Girls at Yatton Abbot, a tiny little town lying nearly midway between Hereford and Ross, in the heart of the red-earthed country of the Wye Valley.

It was a wonderful joy to Hetty to take her little sister round the shops and fit her out with nice things; to realize that the child was, after all, going to be given her chance. And Bella

enjoyed it all so much, and looked so pretty in her excitement; and, too, was so genuinely glad to be with Hetty again, that Hetty's heart was filled with thanksgiving.

Bella could be very affectionate and cuddly; she had missed Hetty; especially when Mrs. Carol had begun to neglect her for Charlie Bates. Hetty tried to instil into her mind a real sense of the importance of what was being done for her, but she was not very successful.

"I want you to learn just everything you can, Bella," Hetty said, as they were packing all the new things into the new trunks on the evening before Bella's departure. "It's so wonderful for you to have the chance to be educated. You'll know how much it counts later on. So see that you work for all you're worth and learn all you can."

"Oh, rather," agreed Bella blythly, as she tenderly wrapped items of her new outfit in tissue paper. "I say, Het, I'm glad we got these undies, and not those ones they first shewed us . . . Aren't the little frills sweet?" She smoothed the pretty little garments with a loving hand. "I shan't want to wear any frock over this shimmy and drawers . . ."

"They're only for best, remember," said Hetty. "You'll use the plain sets for every day. Fold 'em up, sweetie, or we'll never get packed . . . Bell, d'you realise what a wonderful thing being educated is?"

"Oh rather," said Bella, again. "Het, darling," she wheedled, "as it's my last evening, can't I come to the theatre with you to-night? . . . And I'll wear one of my new frocks, and I'll be a grand lady and you come and sell me a programme. . . *Do* let me . . ."

Hetty agreed and played the game out to Bella's entire satisfaction. So her little lecture on the wonders of education never got any further.

When Bella really was safely installed at Yatton Abbot, Hetty's heart sent up pæans of thankfulness. It was a miracle of deliverance from her gravest anxiety. She pictured Bella automatically becoming sober-minded, sensitive, and refined, under the influence of education. Hetty was not quite sure what constituted "education." Possibly it was little more than a word

to her, at this time. But it was a splendid word; a talismanic word; a miracle-making word. She felt that life was clearing round her; her only fear was that she might not be able to keep pace with Bella, and that gave to her ambitions for herself a two-fold urge. She must lift herself up, so that she should be on a level with Bella, when Bella left school. . . . Her dreams raced on into the future. . . .

But how was she to do it? How was she to learn?

She had her living to make, and could by no means choose just how she should make it . . . Progress was bound to be slow, and slowness always irked her . . .

She wanted to go out and grab knowledge and culture wherever it was to be found, eagerly, restlessly; challenging life to withhold anything from her. Time seemed all too short; she felt she must cram something into every moment of it.

Edmund Shale helped her a good deal and considerably more than anyone else. She could talk to Ben, but Shale could talk to *her;* and just now she wanted to listen and to learn; to watch and to absorb. He could put into words a whole lot of things that she felt but could not say.

"If I were awfully rich," she said to him one day, "I'd hire a lot of men like you, just to write down all the things I think about and feel."

"Why a lot?" he asked characteristically.

"Because I feel such an awful lot, no one person could ever deal with it," she cried.

"Deal with it yourself," he suggested.

"Me? I couldn't."

"Say 'I could' sometimes, and you would."

"Takes too long."

"What's the hurry?"

"I've got to get there quick."

"Where?"

"Just there. I'm going in for *style;* it's quickest, and easiest put on."

"It wears thin first, too."

"Let it!"

She flung the defiance at the world at large.

"You're dead wrong," he told her.

"Maybe," she said immovably.

"Pity you've got to suffer so."

She drew a breath.

"I used to think the world a nice, smooth, easy place where people tried to do each other a bit of good. So they do, too. Only not always—not everyone."

"Everyone goes through a stage of being disillusioned; finding that things aren't always what they seem—that there's evil, as well as good, in the world. It's a rotten discovery."

"If one didn't have to *know* it."

"I believe," he said slowly, "that the very first taste of the apple was Eve's most poignant punishment. More poignant than anything that happened after. For with that first taste she *knew* of the existence of evil. She might dash the fruit from her mouth, but she couldn't cast the knowledge from her heart. And with her first cry of anguish, she sent that moment of disillusionment into the future, as a legacy to her daughters."

She turned on him, her hands pressed tight over her heart, her eyes wide and full of pain.

"You've said it! You've *said* it!" she cried out. "I wish you wouldn't—"

"That's one of the things I'll write for you, when you hire me," he said.

After a silence he went off at a tangent.

"You are one of the few girls I've ever met who don't mind a man *not* being in love with her."

"I'd rather they weren't," she said quickly, "because I'm out to *use* people now. To watch them and learn from them and get on by them. And I don't want to have to *feel* anything for them."

He regarded her with his aloof eyes.

"Oh? What are you getting out of me?"

"Good grammar," she told him coolly, "and pronunciation."

"Nothing else?" he asked, a touch chagrined.

"Oh, I like you. But I shouldn't mind not seeing you any more, if it were necessary."

"Necessary to what?"

"To getting on."

He laughed.

"All right, you're welcome to the grammar, but I'd be sorry, very sorry, not to see you any more."

She shrugged.

"I've got a definite object to get to now, and I've got to give my time to getting there."

"What's the next step?"

"I'm not sure. I only know that each step has got to be a step *up*."

"How do you know which direction *is* up?"

"I don't," she answered quickly. "That's what makes it difficult."

The next step presented itself almost immediately. Shale's play ceased to attract and a new play was to be put on at the Harlequin Theatre. Hetty heard that it was a play with a great number of small parts in it.

So she asked to be allowed to play a part.

She asked Rita West, in the first place, for Miss West had been consistently friendly to her. But now the red-haired girl began by raising obstacles.

"But you're a programme girl," she objected. Hetty had always liked Rita West, but that gave her the desire to hit. Why, because she was a programme girl, should anyone suppose that she couldn't be anything else!

Miss West's tone had been a touch defensive, too, as if with her first conscious attempt to rise, Hetty had revealed herself as a menace; had suddenly flapped the red flag of warning in Miss West's face, and was henceforth to be labelled "Dangerous."

For Miss West suddenly recognised in Hetty something that might invade her own domain.

Like may call to like, but it mustn't call for help. It was Hetty's first glimpse of this attitude and it fired her. There was sudden antagonism between them and it aroused in Hetty the desire—since actual hitting was out of the question—to be able to *say* something clever, stinging. But words had been things to tumble headlong from her lips, at the single urge of feeling; sentences had never framed themselves with any conscious design. She had never been aware of a desire to marshall words in this way, and to use them as weapons. She wanted now to be articulate; to say something sharp and polished as cut flint . . .

She said:

"Programme girls are only *made,* you know; not born."

It was the best she could do, and it gave her a sudden sense of immense satisfaction. At that moment, it seemed a lot better and brighter than it was, because it was her first conscious attempt at phrase-making.

She caught a flickering glimpse of words as ordered things; things to command; ranks and ranks of them . . .

"I've got nothing to do with casting the play," said Miss West finally. "I can't help you."

"Who can?" challenged Hetty.

Miss West equivocated; things weren't very far advanced; Hetty's utter lack of experience . . .

"Very well . . ." interrupted Hetty. "I'll help myself."

And she went out, storming angrily against the selfishness of Miss West's attitude.

"Ah, but it's weakness, too." That thought came to her later. "She's *afraid* of me. All right then . . . I needn't be afraid of anyone that's afraid of *me* . . . I needn't mind what anyone like that says or does . . . So long as you're afraid of anyone, you're *weak,* and I don't have to waste any time with weak people. . . ." The thought brought back calm and strength.

Without the least intending it, Miss West had given her both.

Thus armed, she did the thing that seemed reasonable. She applied directly to the author of the play.

The author was having a good deal to say in the producing of his play; he had put money into the Harlequin venture; an office in the theatre had been set aside for his use, and upon the door of this office Hetty knocked.

A voice told her to enter. She did.

Playwriters had become, in Hetty's mind, all of a type with Edmund Shale. She couldn't picture a playwriter who was not like Edmund. So she found Bernard Vevers rather a shock. He was a small man, with a large head, a shock of harsh, indefinite-coloured hair, and near together, short-sighted eyes behind thick-lensed pince-nez.

He was sitting at a desk, and over a lot of very neatly laid out papers, he looked at Hetty, sideways, as if one eye were stronger than the other.

Then he smiled, a smile that seemed altogether too full of irregular, badly coloured teeth.

That smile appeared to be permanent. It remained upon the face of Bernard Vevers for the entire length of Hetty's interview with him.

He waved a hand which told her to sit down in a chair at one end of the desk; she sat down and stated her business—Mr. Vevers smiled. She asked to be allowed to play one of the "little bits." Mr. Vevers smiled. She thought perhaps he might not mind her being inexperienced, if she only did one of the *very* little bits . . . Mr. Vevers continued to smile. Hetty began to wonder what was the matter with him. If she had had more experience of him she would have known that he was almost oblivious to what she was saying; too much aware that she was a woman, to be really aware of anything else concerning her. Bernard Vevers could never rid himself of this absorbing awareness of women: he lived as if he were the only man in a world of women. Men existed for him, not as human beings, but as so many mental machines with which his own mental machinery might exchange ideas. But no matter how brilliantly, or with what absorbing interest, the exchange might be progressing, at the merest glimpse of bright eyes, slender ankles, or even a petticoat ruffle, the machinery would break down; his attention would scatter.

Hetty did not know all this and wondered what was the matter with him. It was really quite simple. He was just lost in contemplation of the starriness of her eyes, the duskiness of her hair, the whiteness of her throat, and the redness of her lips.

He roused himself presently to promise her a maid's part, stood up and held out his hand—a curious, ugly, jointy hand, that Hetty did not much care to touch. However, she put hers into it, and was smiled out of the room.

She did not know that he had already promised the maid's part to five other owners of eyes, hair, throats, and lips, or perhaps she would not have announced so triumphantly to Ben Jones, who was having tea with her later that day:

"I'm an actress, Ben."

Ben stared, and she explained, adding at the end of the explanation:

"Oh, it's just one of the steps."

"You don't want to keep on with it then?"

"Goodness, no! When those ships are launched they'll be launched for me, just as I am, my own self, not for something I'm pretending to be with my face all painted up. Acting seems silly when you've seen anything real. Like dad, when I took his money away from him. Ben, my heart all just sort of crinkles up when I think of him. If I could write, I'd put it all down, because *I* know what he felt, even if it was too awful for him to be able to tell me. And *that* was a tragedy. With nothing made up and posy about it. Oh, my goodness, I've got it all in me! If I could make a story of it—"

"Well, make a story of it," advised Ben.

"How can I?"

"You might be able to, if you tried."

"I don't know enough words."

She paused and looked reflectively into the fire.

"Words are wonderful things," she said after a moment. "I can't make them out, quite."

"How d'you mean?" asked Ben.

"Well, when you come to think of it, they aren't as wonderful as they ought to be . . . No one ever seems to say what they mean. They say something alongside of it, and you have to guess the rest. *Words* never tell it all, do they? All the same you've got to *use* words—if you write, I mean. So where are you? You can only write something alongside of what you really mean, same as when you *say* it."

"Why not try doing the bit you guess? That's interesting."

"Yes, and it's that that counts, and that's useful isn't it?" she went on, with a touch of enthusiasm.

"Useful?"

"Well, I mean to show people that they're really feeling. If you could put your guess into some sort of words . . . Oh, Ben I've *longed* to be able to say that real bit! I can feel it myself, and guess it from others; but I want to *say* it, and the bother of it is that the feeling it and guessing it is so deep in me that it never gets near to words. You can't put just *thought* on to paper. Oh, I don't *know* ———." She broke off, confused by

her own efforts at unravelling the problem of the eternal isolation of one human soul from another.

"I suppose you'll do it some," said Ben looking at her thoughtfully. "Is that how the ships will be launched, d'you think?"

She laughed a little.

"I don't know. Ben, who *was* Helen of Troy? What's the story of the ships, really?"

Rather to her surprise the immortal story fell quite readily from Ben's lips. When she had asked him to tell her about it, she had half-forgotten that it was not Edmund Shale she was talking to.

She listened enthralled, and they spent till the end of tea talking it over.

Then it occurred to her to ask:

"How did you know about it?"

"I've read it," he answered.

"What else have you read?"

"Anything I look into that seems interesting."

"Where d'you look?"

"Second-hand shops, bookstalls, the library—anywhere where books are."

"I did that, and all I got was that book about etiquette." She flushed a little.

"I don't suppose you learnt much from an old thing like that."

"Yes, I did, though," she answered unexpectedly. "I learnt this—that deep down good manners don't change. They're built on good *feeling*."

"What's the manners that come from not knowing any better? When the feeling is quite all right?"

"They're just bad *style;* that's all. Like emptying that shell on to my plate. Bad style, that's all. Not having been educated."

"You've got it all very pat."

"Things are clearing up in my head a lot. You don't go through it the way I've been through it and not get something out of it."

"Kelly, d'you mean?"

She nodded.

After a pause he asked:

"Isn't that wound ever going to heal, Hetty?"

"Heal?" she flashed back quickly; and then, slowly, "Why, yes. But when you cut your hand that time you were chiselling the headstone for Dowse, there came a scab on the cut, didn't there? And when that came off, there was a scar wasn't there?"

She caught his left hand, and looked for the remembered mark.

"There you are; it shews up bright as ever."

He left his hand in her two and leaned out of his chair towards her.

"But it doesn't hurt," he said. "There's no feeling in the little white bit."

"Well, I've a little white bit in my heart, and there's no feeling in *it*, either. And I'll watch it that there never is again, too. Shall you ever put your left hand bang in front of the business end of a chisel again, Ben?"

He shook his head.

"Those white bits are just a warning to us both," she said.

She looked down at his long-fingered hand, hardened along the palm by the work he used to do, but already sensitised in the finger-tips by the work he was doing now, and spreading it flat, measured her own against it, palm to palm . . .

He drew a breath, and raised his eyes to hers. But she was looking down at their hands with absent eyes and he saw that her thoughts were distant.

"I've got to read," she said, and dismissed his hand with a little gesture. "I've got to read and cultivate my brain. I almost wish I was Bella sometimes, Ben. She's got such advantages. It's wonderful to have a real education; a *good* education, like she's getting."

"How does she like it?"

"Fine. They seem to make quite a fuss of her by her letters. She'll come out a lovely little lady; you'll see."

"Has *she* got the feeling for it?" he asked a little abruptly.

"Feeling?"

"To build up her manners on, like you said just now."

"Well, if I've got it, why shouldn't she? We're sisters."

"Yes, but lately. . . ."

"Oh, Bella's only a kid. She was influenced, that's all. It's easy to be influenced when you're a kid . . . Bella's all right. I'm not a bit afraid about her any more."

"I'm so glad of that, Hetty. That's a big worry gone."

"My only trouble will be to keep pace with her."

"For God's sake, don't try," he broke out bluntly.

"But I'll *have* to. Do you want her to come back from school and be ashamed of me?"

"But you tried that before; making yourself good enough for someone else, and it didn't work."

Hetty looked at him thoughtfully a moment, then she said:

"Yes it did; in it's way."

"A rotten, painful way, then."

"Painful, yes. But effective, too. Don't you think so? Honestly, now, don't you think Nicko did me good?"

"I'd rather you weren't done good than have it cost so much."

"I suppose you'd be quite content to have me stay just as I was in the old Tag Street days?" She asked with a flick of derision.

"Quite," he answered abruptly.

She laughed.

"Well, that's just like you, old Ben. But it isn't like *me*. You can go on being Tag Street all your life, but *I'm* not going to."

There was a moment of silence; then he added, "And then are you going to be ashamed of *me?*"

"Why, Ben!" she cried, quickly negativing such an idea.

"Well, you said Bella might be of you."

"That's different."

"Is it? I don't see that."

"I'd never be ashamed of you . . . you might know that."

"Why wouldn't you?" he persisted.

"I don't know. But I wouldn't, that's all."

And he questioned no further. Instead, he reverted to something she had said a minute or two earlier.

"And when you've read, and done all that part of it, shall you write a story?"

She laughed gaily.

"Suppose I should?" she said, and added, "Suppose you should rebuild the Dome of St. Paul's! They're always saying it's groggy."

"Suppose I should," he answered in his solemn way. "Any-

way, my firm's got the contract to build the public hall at Little Diddicombe down in Somerset."

The comparative was so gravely made that she laughed again.

"Ben! if you aren't the funniest old thing! St. Paul's and Little Diddicombe! What a name! And who's heard of it, anyway?"

"My firm's heard of it, and they're sending me down with the fellow that's going to do it. So it'll be interesting, even if it isn't St. Paul's," answered Ben, placidly.

But Hetty only continued to laugh at him.

She got the maid's part, in spite of the other five to whom it had been promised. Whether it was because her eyes were starrier, her hair duskier, her throat whiter, or her lips redder than theirs, she never knew. Somehow, after a few preliminary confusions, the situation adjusted itself, as Bernard Vevers always trusted such situations to do, and she was told to attend rehearsals.

She was now an actress.

That was quite a different thing from being a programme girl. The difference was so marked that, after a week of rehearsals, she studied herself in her mirror and thought:

"You'd think by the way people treat me now, that my very flesh and bones were different to-day from what they were a week ago. There's something stupid in that. But I don't care. I'm getting *on*. . . ."

Bernard Vevers took a marked interest in Hetty and she allowed him to—though she was not blind to the meaning of this interest—because he was useful to her. He could take her to restaurants that she couldn't possibly afford to go to, and so enable her to study people she would not otherwise have had the opportunity for studying in this way. She could watch their dress and their manners and listen to snatches of their conversation. She was quick to sort out from the mannerisms she noticed around her the ones that were the outcome of a genuine easiness from the ones that sprang from a desire to appear easy.

This, she decided, was important.

She began to give her dress those little touches which put a finish to a toilet, and tried all sorts of experiments with her manner, with her voice, her expression, her walk, the gestures of her hands.

She made him take her to the Madrid and she specially insisted upon being fed on a pink decoction dished in a fluted shell. He didn't know—how should he?—that she was revisiting a battlefield, and that the colour in her cheeks was the flush of victory. Belated victory perhaps; but very soothing.

Then came the excitement and tension of the first night of Vevers' play and afterwards the interest in and gradual accustomedness to subsequent nights.

Bernard Vevers told her one evening that he had a new play coming on at another theatre in the spring, and that he would fix it so that she got a real part in it. He added that he ought to be able to get her seven pounds a week. She thanked him with radiant gratitude and went home walking on air. She didn't much want to be "on the stage," but the prospect of seven pounds a week . . . well, it made her feel like a millionairess even in prospect . . .

She had reached her little front door, and had inserted her key, when she heard steps behind her, and turned.

She seemed, just for a moment, to freeze solid, for in the dim light of the unspacious landing she saw Nickolas Kelly.

He raised his hat and said:

"I was in front to-night and spotted you on the stage. I waited for you at the stage door, and followed you here. I'm so glad I've found you, Hetty! I've been looking for you."

The words were almost stupidly formal, but there was nothing formal in the tone; and there was something in his handsome eyes that made Hetty suddenly remember what Sally had said of the ten thousand devils she had launched in his heart, and she was frightened. She turned away, swiftly opened the door, ran into her room, and slammed the door in his face. Then she stood, scarcely breathing, listening.

She relaxed when she heard his steps on the stairs, receding this time, till they faded away to nothing . . .

"If that isn't the rottenest thing that could have happened . . . If that isn't absolutely the rottenest thing."

She said it over and over again, unable to think of anything else to say.

And her heart was thumping as if the "little white bit" were not so utterly without feeling as she had tried to believe . . .

CHAPTER X

From that moment, it seemed to Hetty that Kelly literally haunted her. Wherever she went, she saw him. If she went out shopping she would find him standing at the corner of the little foreign-looking street; when she went down to the theatre in the evening she would see him at the stage door. When she left after the show, he would be there again. He did not speak to her, beyond a word or two of greeting, if she happened to pass within word-shot, but he looked at her with those handsome, changed eyes of his in a way to give her always a little thrill of fear.

He seemed to be taking very complete bearings of her most usual movements.

She did not understand the obsessional impulse which drove him to see her, to devour her with his eyes; really, to torture himself with her; but she realised what her own torment was at seeing him again and was afraid of it.

One evening when she was leaving her father—she used to go down to see him every week—she came face to face with Kelly in the shadows that lay just beyond the little gate.

He had followed her home, and now knew all her haunts; after this there would be no escaping him.

She hurried till she was out of sight and sound of No. 39, and he hurried beside her; then she stopped—looked up into his burning blue eyes; and:

"Stop it," she said fiercely. "Stop this following me round. I've cut you right out; you won't get anything by pestering me this way."

"You can't cut me out," he said slowly, and, without being conscious of it, dramatically.

"What d'you want? Don't you know I'm sick of seeing you?"

"I want you," he answered, in the same slow way.

"You'll never get me."

"Perhaps not."

"There's no 'perhaps' about it. Even if you were free to *marry*, I wouldn't look at you."

"I'd make you."

"You couldn't. There's nothing on earth could make me. So stop it—this following me round."

"I can't."

"You've got to!"

"I tell you, I can't."

She drew a breath and her eyes widened. A feeling of fear and helplessness swept her.

"It's utterly futile," she said sharply. "I could never feel anything . . . never look at you again . . ." she finished breathlessly.

"I'll make you," he said again.

"If you only knew how I hate you!" she cried in a low voice.

"Then you *do* feel something . . . I knew you did . . ."

"Oh," she gave a little cry of torment, and began to run. He shot out a hand and caught her arm. She was pulled back, and swung round on him, her eyes blazing.

"Let me go," she panted.

"No," he answered. "I'm coming with you . . . Don't make a scene in the street, Hetty . . ."

Tears of anger smarted in her eyes, then she blinked them away fiercely, and went along with him.

"All right . . . Let go my arm," she said through set teeth.

He dropped his hand and they walked on together.

They walked to the station in silence.

When the train came in, he opened the door of an empty first-class compartment, but she ignored him and got into a third, already more than half full. She took the only unoccupied corner and he followed, and sat beside her. He didn't say anything, but he sat close to her and his eyes scarcely left her.

At Charing Cross she tried to get rid of him again, but he wouldn't go and she didn't know how to make him. He only left her at the stage door of the Harlequin Theatre. All the way from Penbury, they had scarcely spoken.

Now he said:

"See you to-morrow; good-night, Hetty."

And she tore through the chilly corridors to the dressing room, stirred and angry.

He continued his siege of her, and she had to endure it—she avoided him as much as she could, but it was a close siege while it lasted, and a torture to them both.

"What you get out of it, I can't see!" she said to him once, utterly exasperated.

"I don't get anything out of it," he told her.

"Then what on earth d'you do it for?"

And he answered as before.

"I can't help it." Then, "and I'll get something out of it some day."

A week before Easter, Vevers' play failed and died, and Hetty was out of work, but she had his promise of a part and seven pounds a week in his next play, and so felt that the immediate future was secure. Kelly troubled her more than anything else at this time, but almost immediately a means of escape, at least for a time, offered, and she took it.

She went down to Yatton Abbot to spend a week with Bella.

Bella was remaining at Yatton Abbot for the Easter holidays in charge of Miss Belt—one of the mistresses at Miss Crossley's school—who lived in the little town, and sometimes during the shorter holidays looked after one or two of the girls who came from long distances.

It had been Miss Belt's own suggestion that, since Bella was her only charge this Easter, Hetty should come down for a while.

That week at Yatton Abbot was wonderful to Hetty. Miss Belt made her quietly and comfortably welcome and her heart seemed to glow every time she looked at Bella. Bella was prettier than ever, with her carefully burnished curls and the added pink that the country life had given to her cheeks. And her manner to Miss Belt . . . So charmingly attentive; so decorous . . .

"She's a lovely little lady," Hetty thought, filled with gratitude. "I always knew she would be."

They went for walks together through the lanes, and the red-earthed woods; with the most luxuriant country Hetty had ever imagined rolling out around them, endlessly rich and verdant. In this beauty Bella was living her new life; breathing this air; seeing this wonder of pasture and woods; of hill and vale. How

could she do otherwise than prosper? Tag Street and Mrs. Carol; both seemed all the ages behind . . .

Bella seemed very happy, too. She chattered of the girls at the school; of those who were most friendly with her; and of the one particular chum of the moment until Hetty felt that she knew them all; and if the decorousness Bella showed to Miss Belt was somewhat relaxed in talking to Hetty, that was certainly natural.

And if she sometimes seemed to attach greater importance to good fun than to lesson-books, why, that, too, was natural. It was all so new to her, and she was such a joyous-spirited little girl . . .

When Hetty, at the end of her week went back to town, she went with a feeling of being utterly satisfied.

Immediately on reaching the little Soho restaurant she was told by Madame Gandini that "the handsome man" had called again and again, insisting that he must be given Miss Carol's address, as he was going away and it was most important that he should see her before he went . . .

Nicholas Kelly going away! It was almost too good to be believed . . .

But, Madame continued, as Miss Carol had given strict orders that "the handsome man" was on no account to be told of her whereabouts, Madame had steadfastly denied all knowledge of them, and since Friday evening, he had not called. It was Monday now.

"Did he say where he was going?" asked Hetty eagerly.

Madame shook her head.

"I wish he'd go for *ever* . . ." said Hetty. "But you lied for me nobly, Madame, and I'm grateful.'"

"There are times," said Madame, with simplicity, "when the good saints stop their ears and smile with benignity upon the liar . . ."

"Well, if they've a heart among them, they're smiling their broadest on you," Hetty assured her.

Her contentment increased and she went blythely up to her rooms.

Next day she went to the Harlequin Theatre to see Vevers, but found that there was no longer an office set aside for his use, there. She did not succeed in seeing anyone, because the whole theatre

was in the convulsions of rehearsals for a new play; so she went round to the nearest post-office, looked up Vevers' home number in the telephone directory, and rang him up.

When his voice answered her, she told him that she was back from Yatton Abbot, chatted for a moment about the lovely time she had spent there, and finally asked about the part with the seven pounds a week attached to it.

When, she wanted to know, would she be required for rehearsal?

To which Bernard Vevers blandly answered that rehearsals had started last Wednesday and were progressing favourably.

Hetty was startled.

"But what about the part you promised to me?" she asked.

"Couldn't get the management to agree, dear," said Vevers and the casual endearment suddenly made Hetty furious. "You see, you're so inexperienced."

"But you definitely *promised* it to me," she insisted.

"Did I? What a pity!" The bland tones made her want to throw things, but what can you throw over a telephone wire except words! She threw a few of these, and a laugh came back to her; then a lightly flung invitation to lunch on a vague someday . . .

She knew then that whatever interest he had taken in her was gone, and her anger was not without its touch of piqued vanity, for she had got into the habit of thinking that she could do as she liked with Bernard Vevers.

"Not on your life," she answered the invitation bluntly and slammed down the receiver.

She raged against him with all the force of her vocabulary the next time Ben Jones came to tea, and he listened in his gravely sympathetic way which always managed to be comforting even though it was so little demonstrative.

"But of course," she finished with inexpressible scorn, "he's the sort of man whose interest in a girl only ever means one thing . . ."

Ben raised his level eyes and looked at her across the little tea table.

"You knew that, didn't you, Hetty?" he asked simply.

She answered his look with a quick turn of the eyes and coloured hotly. Ben had a way of striking key-notes.

"Yes," she answered, without qualification of any sort.

He didn't say any more, but Hetty caught his meaning, as was proved by what she said to herself as she got into bed that night.

"Serves me right . . ." she said, savagely, "for having anything to do with a man like Vevers . . . For letting him give me lunches and dinners; for letting him think for one single second that he was ever going to get what he wanted. *I* knew what he meant, all right. Serves me *darn* well right . . ."

Which was a useful conclusion to have come to; but she was not yet able to think that it was worth seven pounds a week.

The following months were hard ones for Hetty.

She was once again up against the overhelming ranks of unemployed, and her own lack of qualification for any particular work.

The fare to Yatton Abbot and other incidental expenses of her visit there, had made serious inroads upon her small savings; and now they seemed to melt like snow, no matter how careful she tried to be. For two months she went the rounds of offices, warehouses, shops, theatres and theatrical agents, and had nothing to shew at the end of that time beyond worn-down heels and an empty purse.

She consulted Sally at the city teashop, but though Sally made several suggestions, nothing came of them. As for Jimmy Cliff the most helpful thing he could think of saying was:

"You was a mug to leave old Fontaine, girlie; a proper mug . . ."

He said it so often that Sally was moved to urge him to "chew on something else for a change." So Hetty got nothing there.

When Vevers' seven pounds a week had been in prospect she had planned to have Bella with her for the summer holidays. But that dream was shimmering further away into the realms of things impossible, with each workless day, and the disappointment was bitter.

She gave up all hope of it when she was sweating out the dog days of July in "the ribbons" at a big, cheap and nasty drapery store out Hackney way, on a salary that was reckoned in shillings; and she wrote to Bella and told her that their plans could not materialise unless some sort of miracle happened. But Bella wrote back in the highest spirits, assuring Hetty that it was quite all right, as she had been invited to spend the holiday at the home

of her especial chum, Nancy Allington, whose people were very well off and had a lovely place in North Wales; and very likely they might go to Swansea and Mumbles for a week or two . . . And would Hetty please ask Mr. Shale if she couldn't have some money so that she could go into Hereford and get some things as these people were rather posh and she'd have to be decently dressed. Miss Belt had promised to take her.

"I wish it could be *you*, Het," the letter finished, "because Belty is sure to make me get everything very plain-Jane, and you wouldn't. But still, my *holiday* things aren't anything to do with her, are they? So I shall get them as nice as ever I can, without making her eyes pop . . .

"Isn't it all glorious?

"Loads of love and kisses,

"Your loving Bella."

Hetty was tremendously relieved and glad, and if during a stewing August she sometimes thought a little wistfully of "Swansea or Mumbles," her thoughts were without bitterness or envy.

In September she left the "ribbons" at the drapery store. Temperamental eyes may be useful to getting this sort of job, but they sometimes make the keeping of it difficult. Having had occasion to tell the head of her department just what she thought of him, he retaliated by finding an excuse to complain of her work and finally got her discharged.

By the beginning of October she was down and out. There was no one she could turn to, or no one she *would* turn to. Ben had been a good deal away, first to Somerset with the architect who was planning Little Diddicombe's Town Hall; after that with the same man to various other places.

So she hadn't been seeing him nearly as frequently as usual. Then quite suddenly he left the firm he had been working for and went to Trenchard's of Manchester. He and she wrote to each other, of course, but she did not tell him how hard things were for her. Ben, she reflected, couldn't be making much and he had his father to look after, wholly, now.

Edmund Shale was on tour—in the intervals of play-writing he did play-acting—and anyway Edmund never had a bean. Jimmy Cliff was out of the question; he wasn't the type you could go to.

Sally Silver had her own flag to fly, and its little flutter was only kept going with difficulty. As for her father, Hetty felt that she would have died a thousand deaths before she would apply to him . . .

So she carried on as she best could and managed to live, without ever knowing quite how she did it.

She weathered the worst weeks of winter by working in the Gandini kitchen—and when Madame Gandini said work, she *meant* work—and just as it began to look as though this was to be the end of her desires, she came to anchor as cloak-room attendant at Cassim's night club.

CHAPTER XI

The first few evenings at her new post in the sumptuously appointed dressing room at Cassim's seemed to Hetty to pass before her, like some sort of an Arabian Nights' Pageant. The frocks; the dazzle and flash of jewelry; the confusing buzz of chatter and laughter; the atmosphere heavy with assorted perfumes, and cloudy with the lavish use of powder . . . She had no time to get individuals sorted out. But after a time, when the same women, young, very young, middle-aged, old, and even very old, had entrusted their wraps to her care evening after evening, she began to recognise, not only the frocks, but some of the women in—more-or-less in—them. On their part, they began to greet her with nods and smiles, to exchange a few words with her, and to include her in the scheme of the evening.

She soon settled to the feeling that she had a definite part in the festive night life of Cassim's. It rescued her from the barrenness of the past struggling months and gave her time to find her poise again.

As with the brief stage life she had experienced, this job gave her the daytime to herself, but getting to bed as she did, at an hour when primitive man would have been out hunting his breakfast, she found that quite a big part of the day was spent in sleeping. She was rarely really up before noon. She breakfasted and lunched together, and afterwards went for a walk, sometimes to look at shops, and sometimes just to look at people.

When she had been on the stage, she had depended upon Vevers, chiefly, to take her to the happy hunting grounds of style, and manner, but now she hunted alone, and liked it better; and found herself hunting more than merely style and manner. She liked to get out and mingle with the human restlessness that makes up the life of cities; to watch people going about their business; to wonder about them; to invent families and environments for them. She didn't do it consciously—or at any rate, not self-

consciously—but whenever she was among people she found herself absorbedly storing up impressions.

She indulged her interest at her leisure, past anxiety lulled by a sense of present security; for Cassim's seemed likely to prove a permanency.

But spring is the season of new impulses, new stirrings, and when the luxury of security had lost its first power to keep her satisfied, spring stirred her to restlessness again; set her seeking anew . . .

Quite suddenly it seemed that she had watched and absorbed enough; that she must cease to take in, and begin to give out; to express in some way the motley accumulation with which her imagination was stocked.

She tried writing as a means of outlet, but found it surprisingly difficult to put even quite simple thoughts into words. She was so full of imaginings, so full of discoveries, and theories, that she had felt that nothing could stop it all overflowing quite naturally onto paper.

But it didn't. And her first efforts seemed to her very feeble and stuttering.

She was beginning to despond over the failure of these first efforts when Edmund Shale drifted back to town and up to the Soho rooms. Hetty found him sitting on the stairs outside her little front door when she went home to tea one afternoon. She welcomed him cordially, very happy at seeing him again; took him in and gave him tea. She left Shale to do the talking, which he was quite willing to do and did for some time. But presently out of silence he asked:

"Well Miss Pilgrim, how's the progress progressing?"

She looked at him quickly.

"Are you laughing at me?" she demanded.

"What a queer sense of humour you must think I have," he protested.

She told him then, how things had been with her since Vevers broke his promise, but she made light of it all, so that he could only guess just how bad those months had been.

"So the steps have scarcely been up, have they?" she finished with a rather wistful laugh against herself.

"How do you know they haven't been up?" he asked. "You

said you didn't know which direction *is* up . . . So how can you be sure?" She leaned towards him eagerly. Then with a little rush of confidence:

"Edmund, I've been trying to write."

She coloured very pink as she confessed it.

"Well, there you are then," he said conclusively. "Let's see it; may I?"

"I've burnt it."

"That *was* unfriendly of you."

"No; it wasn't worth keeping . . . Edmund, what do you do when you've got it all *here,"* she struck her bosom lightly with a clenched hand, "and can't get it into words . . .?"

"I don't think there's anything to be done but to wait until you get it *here,* too," and he tapped his forehead with a forefinger.

"Oh, I see," she said quickly . . . and added just as quickly: "No, I don't . . . But . . ." and broke off to laugh slightly.

"You will," he said heartily, and they drifted to other things. They sat talking till it was time for Hetty to go to Cassim's; about books chiefly, and again she left it all to him; she could not do anything else, for books were something she knew nothing about.

Perhaps a realization of this was borne in upon her, for when he had taken her to Cassim's and was leaving her at the entrance, she said suddenly, as she had said it months ago to Ben:

"I've got to read . . ."

But this time the idea had formed into a resolution.

So her hunting hereafter took a new direction. She turned from people to books, and became absorbed in a world of hitherto untasted delights. She read everything she could afford to get hold of, from the *Dressmakers and Cutters Guide* because she wanted to make herself good clothes to *Paradise Lost,* because she liked the rolling, sonorous dignity of the opening lines. *Paradise Lost* gave her word-fever. She didn't understand it; scarcely tried to understand it. She just let herself be filled and thrilled; amazed and dazed by wonderful phrase after wonderful phrase, so that she was in ecstacy at the sheer sound and rhythm long before she discovered any noticeable meaning. She didn't get a quarter through it; restlessness caught her again. She read wildly and scrappily, dipping into one book after another—there are so

many between the *Dressmakers and Cutters Guide* and *Paradise Lost*—digging little bits out here and there, much as a seeker after treasure might dig, if he badly wanted the treasure, but was not possessed of a lot of patience.

When the word-fever had run its course, she read less and understood more.

But she was no more successful when she again tried to write, although at first she seemed to be. Writing came so much more easily. She could cover pages so quickly that she was elated with success, until Edmund Shale told her that it was just a hash-up of what she had been reading and had but the smallest spark of originality in it.

"Reading's no good," she thought, discontentedly. And her restless brain, seeking the wherefore of it all, added, later:

"At least, not by itself. You've got to read a *bit* and live a *lot* before you can do anything," and the discovery banished the discontent. She left the reading she had done, and the living she was doing, to settle up and come to terms.

And then, just as she was beginning to get all this chaos into some degree of focus she heard from Mrs. Robert Shale that Miss Crossley had written requesting that Bella be removed from the Yatton Abbot School.

This was stunning news.

She went to see Mrs. Shale, who was very kind and begged her not to take it too seriously.

"Bella has *not* been expelled," she explained. "Miss Crossley is careful to make that clear. It is just that the child does not . . . *fit in* . . . She is wilful and high-spirited, you know; perhaps she finds the country dull. Her most serious crime seems to be that she *will* break bounds. Of course, that is naughty of her . . . But, my dear, not . . . not *fatal,* shall we say?" Mrs. Shale talked very kindly.

Hetty, sitting straight on the edge of a chair in Mrs. Shale's drawing room, nodded but could not speak. She was relieved by the mild nature of the charges against Bella, but it was a terrible blow.

All her own problems and perplexities ceased to exist for her, until Bella's affairs were settled. Another school must be found for her, and while Mrs. Shale was once more seeing to this part

of the question, Bella landed her pert little self and quite a lot of luggage at the Soho rooms and remained there.

Bella was able to reassure Hetty a good deal. She made light of such rebellions against discipline as she confessed to, and declared that the school rules had become ridiculously strict. All the girls were complaining, but only *she* had had the courage to defy authority . . . Bella's story made her something of a heroine . . . And Hetty's fears were appeased.

Hetty stoutly assured herself that she was not really disappointed, and found all the old string of excuses for Bella.

"I hate the country, Het," Bella declared. "For God's sake don't have me sent to the country again. Nothing but dismal-looking trees, and slab-faced cows, and a smell of rotting mangle-wurzles or something . . . Give me somewhere where there are *lights* . . ."

So with this preference of hers in view, Mrs. Shale arranged that she should go to school no further from town than Barnes, and was optimistic that the change of environment would do Bella all the good in the world.

Hetty was immensely cheered, and entered upon a new lease of hope when Bella was installed once more.

But her own life seemed to have been caught and held suspended during the time it took to settle Bella's interrupted education, and she found it difficult to find her feet again. She had been at Cassim's nearly a year now and was beginning to ask herself where such a job could lead . . . She grew panicky at the thought of being in a blind-alley. But the impulse to write; interrupted in its first baby efforts, had not recovered enough from the shock to re-assert itself. She tried to force it; and failed . . . And clung to the Night Club as to a safeguard against destitution.

During her evening at Cassim's, there was always an idle spell. When supping and dancing were in full swing, the cloak-rooms were deserted save for the casual stragglers. But there was one visitor who used to arrive regularly, night after night, during this quiet spell, just before midnight. A very young girl, fair-haired, fair-skinned, almost absurdly pretty in a baby way, with the lips of a school-girl, and the eyes of a sophisticated cherub. She was

the most assured thing Hetty had ever seen, even in that room, where assurance was the rule, and she seemed to be, in some way, attracted by Hetty, for she always lingered to talk a little. Hetty often wondered who she was and why she came at an hour when even most of the stage--folk and theatre-goers had already been there some time.

One evening as she leaned across the dressing table, peering into the mirror and applying powder to a flawless nose, the stranger said to Hetty:

"Honestly now, as woman to woman, am I getting to look old?" She turned her baby-face to Hetty, who, a little taken aback, answered:

"No."

Baby-face said seriously:

"Good. I don't want to have to blow my brains out just yet."

Hetty looked at her, puzzled.

"I couldn't *exist* after I'd lost my youth!" explained Baby-face. "Imagine being old and wrinkled! No. At the very first wrinkle I blow my brains out!"

Her tragic intensity sat so ludicrously upon her peach-bloom youth, that Hetty laughed; and Baby-face came down from the heights with an abrupt change of tone—

"What are you laughing at?" she demanded. "Don't you think I've got the brains to blow?"

"Oh, I didn't say that . . ." began Hetty.

"No, but you were thinking it."

"No," said Hetty judicially, "and I wasn't even thinking it."

"Well, what *were* you thinking, then?"

This was, as Baby-face had said, "woman to woman;" Hetty might be a cloak-room girl; Baby-face might be . . . well anything, for all Hetty knew; but this was woman to woman, and she answered it that way.

"I was thinking," she said slowly, "that you looked rather funny doing that sort of play-acting."

The cherubic eyes went large and round, and:

"What d'you mean by that?" asked Baby-face.

"Well you didn't really mean that about blowing out your brains, did you?"

"Of course I did!"

Hetty shook her head.

"You just said it to . . . to be . . . effective," she insisted.

"Well, I'm *blowed,*" said Baby-face and they looked at each other for some moments in silence.

"I'm not sure that I oughtn't to report you to the management for that," said Baby-face presently.

"What's to stop you?" asked Hetty amiably.

There was another moment of silent staring. Then Baby-face laughed, and Hetty laughed with her. Baby-face turned to the mirror again, curled up the tips of her eyelashes with a light finger; smoothed the carmine on her lips, and touched the fair curls over her ears. Then she swung round and looked at Hetty again.

"You're a queer sort of girl to find in a cloak-room," she said, "and you've got the most gorgeous eyes I've ever seen in my life. Has anyone ever told you that before?"

"Lots of people."

"You take it coolly enough."

"What is there to get excited about?"

"Don't you like to hear people tell you about it? Compliments are the breath of life to me."

"I haven't time to listen to the type of people who tell me about it now."

"What type are they? Men?"

"The wrong sort of men, mostly."

Baby-face tilted her head on one side and wrinkled her nose.

"Look here, you know . . ." she began, but went off at a tangent.

"What's your particular *scheme?*"

"Oh, I don't absolutely know, yet . . ."

"Are you aiming to anything definite?"

"Yes, at being interested, chiefly."

"So am I! Only I call it not being bored."

"I don't see how *anyone* can be bored."

"I'm bored most of the time; at least I would be if I couldn't find heaps of people to amuse me."

"Well, I find heaps of people to amuse me, too."

"How can you, when you sit here evening in and evening out?"

"Heaps of amusing people come in here every evening, I assure you."

"Yes, but you don't know them."

"No, but I can look at them."

"What's the fun in that?"

"I find it."

"And this," said Baby-face appealing to all sorts of people who weren't there—"this is the girl who had the cheek to call me funny! Why I'd absolutely *expire* with boredom if I were in your place."

"Isn't it lucky you're not, then?"

"For *me*. But not for you."

"Why not for me?"

"Because if I were you, you'd be *me* . . ." Hetty looked at Baby-face.

"Well?" she questioned coolly.

"Well, wouldn't you jump at being me? My father's got tons of money . . . He's . . ." But she broke off without revealing anything further of her father.

"But you're bored," objected Hetty.

"Good heavens, isn't it worth while being bored to be *rich* and able to have all the comforts of life?"

"No," said Hetty roundly. And with that word she got the two aspects of life weighed up and in their places for good.

Baby-face had done her a service.

And she was destined to do a service for Baby-face; but that was not immediately.

Every evening, after this, Baby-face lingered in the cloak-room for a talk with Hetty.

"With those eyes," she used very frequently to say, "you could do simply anything."

"I'm using my eyes to look with, not as ornaments to be looked *at*," Hetty told her.

"And some day you'll stop looking and just sit around and mop up the compliments."

"I wonder if I ever will."

"I believe you're a cold-blooded vamp."

"No, I do know that much about myself." And Hetty laughed a little ruefully.

"Have you ever been in love?" enquired Baby-face.

"Yes."

"I'm thrilled to death! Who was he?"

"A man."

"Why didn't you marry him?"

"Because he was already married."

"But you surely didn't let a little thing like that come between you?"

"Yes, I did."

"But everyone's in love with somebody else's husband in these days. Wouldn't she divorce him or anything?"

"I didn't bother to see about it."

"Why not?"

"Because he was a liar."

"You queer, crinkly old crinoline! If men ceased to be liars, where would all our good times go to?"

Hetty looked almost startled.

"Isn't that hateful?" she said quickly and with vehemence.

Baby-face spread her little hands and shrugged.

"Well, there you are, anyway. I've been in love heaps of times. I think everyone ought to go in for every sort of love. I've been in love with young men and old men and distinguished men, and obscure men, and *once* with *two* men at the same moment."

"You've been busy."

"I'm an experimentalist," said Baby-face serenely.

"Yes, I think you must be," agreed Hetty.

Baby-face moved restlessly round the room; then came back and said abruptly:

"Shall I tell you a secret?" But before Hetty could answer she had swung away again and was saying: "No, perhaps I'd better not . . . Have *you* any secrets?"

"Not many."

"I've tons of them. Pretty nearly everything I do is a secret."

"Really? But how can you keep people from knowing about them?"

"I don't. Everybody knows all my secrets . . . Everybody, that is, except . . ." She broke off again, then went on quickly: "The mistake people make when they want to keep a secret, is to tell it to one person and keep it from everyone else. You

ought always to tell it to everyone, and keep it from one. The one that matters. See?"

"I think there's something in that."

"I've made some very useful discoveries in my time . . . I say now, what about this question of secrets?"

"Well, what about it?"

"Can I trust you?"

"Why should you want to?"

"I can't imagine; only I *like* you, for some reason or other."

"Then why should you doubt it?"

"Oh, you can *like* people! People you couldn't possibly *trust*. If I make you my bosom friend and tell you all my secrets, will you promise not to tell the one who matters?"

"No, who is he?"

Baby-face took a moment to decide to tell; then she said:

"My dad. He runs newspapers, and those sticky, home-sweet-home sort of magazines for women. Ever read them?"

"Often. And been grateful to them."

"Why?"

"For the patterns and things."

"But the patterns aren't good."

"They may not be from the point of view of one who can spend thirty guineas on a frock, but from the point of view of one who has to think twice before spending thirty *shillings*."

"And the advice, too? Oh *do* tell me that you've really, absolutely used the advice too . . . You know, Sister Cissy's answers to correspondents . . ." "No Maudie, you should not have said 'pleased to meet you,' when you were introduced to the good-looking boy . . ." Baby-face broke off laughing, but Hetty wasn't laughing at all. She looked up at the sparkling face and drew a breath.

"I'd have given the heart out of my breast once for some one to tell me just how to deal with a pink mixture that was brought to the table in a scallop shell," she said. "You needn't laugh . . . There's nothing so . . . so *damned* funny about it . . ."

Her tone made Baby-face blink her cherub's eyes.

"I say," she said, "someone has all too obviously blundered . . ."

"You just don't *know*, that's all."

The cherub's eyes blinked again.

"What is it, then? Just a question of caste?" she asked.

"Just a question of style!" answered Hetty. "You asked me once what I was out for. Well, that's one of the things."

"Style?"

"Yes, I've got to find it out, because no one's ever taught me."

"So you would really find Sister Cissy's page useful?" said Baby-face slowly.

"I often have."

"I thought every one just read it to scream over, like I do. Life's a yell, isn't it?"

For the next few evenings Baby-face seemed too much in a hurry to talk to Hetty; she just rushed in, whirled around the room in a state of high excitement, and then rushed out.

But at the end of a week she lingered again, and said: "Don't you think we're sent into this world to try everything there is?"

Hetty answered cautiously:

"What exactly do you mean?"

"Well, oughtn't we to make the most of our lives? Get everything we can out of 'em? Squeeze the last drop of juice from the dear old lime, so to speak?"

"We might as well, I suppose. Depends how you mean."

"Oh well, oughtn't we to have a good time and enjoy ourselves? Know everything? Do everything? So that when we come to our death-beds, we can look back and see that there's not a single sensation we haven't sampled?" There was something curiously excited about Baby-face this evening . . .

"I think that there are lots of things we oughtn't to do," said Hetty.

"Oh, you've got a mind like the great-grandmother of all the copy books!" said Baby-face disgustedly. She moved about the room, then pirouetted round, facing Hetty again.

"I've fallen in love again," she said with some abruptness.

"Well, is that the secret?" asked Hetty.

Baby-face nodded.

"He's *wonderful,*" she said.

"Is he an experimentalist too?"

"How did you guess?"

Hetty laughed. Baby-face perched herself sideways on the big dressing-table near Hetty's chair, and leaned confidentially forward.

"You know, this is absolutely the first time I've met my real mate. He says we're soul-mates. Oh, yes, I know souls are a bit hackneyed these days, but all the same, we really *are*. He says I've an adventurous spirit and that he has too, and that we're a couple of highway robbers, holding up life and demanding that it shall spill its treasures for us. Oh, he's wonderful!"

Baby-face clasped her little hands and tilted back her head ecstatically. Hetty found herself suddenly remembering Kelly. She pictured this unknown man as being like Kelly, and felt an instant distrust of him.

"We go out on all sorts of secret razzles together," went on Baby-face.

"He's going to take me to Limehouse one night. He says it's a thing every honest sensationalist ought to see. What do *you* think about dope?"

The question, so casually asked, rather took Hetty's breath away.

"D'you mean . . ." she began.

"Cocaine, heroin and all that sort of thing," put in Baby-face, waving a hand.

"I don't know. I think anyone must be mad to risk it."

"Oh, there's no risk, if you're strong-willed."

"I've heard that there is."

"You mustn't believe all you hear. He says it's only the weaklings who go down under it. And I think it's puny to be afraid of anything. Absolutely puny."

"I think it's only sensible to be afraid of some things. Afraid enough to avoid them anyway."

"Oh, he says you oughtn't to avoid anything. He says all the so-called ugliness in the world is only beauty in disguise and that some of the greatest geniuses have been drunkards and dopers, and yet their works live for ever . . ."

"I wouldn't want to listen to theories like that."

"Why not?"

"They sound too . . . too plausible . . . I'd be afraid of

believing in them . . . Right down in me, I know they're all wrong . . . I *know* they are . . . The world couldn't go on if they were true . . ."

"But they *are* true . . . Look at Villon and de Quincy and . . . . Oh, well, and heaps of others . . . The newspapers get up stories against it. It's their job to be smug. Dad's running no end of a stunt against the smart set, so, of course, he mustn't know of my adventures. The situation would be too piquant for him to appreciate . . ."

"But you haven't really *tried* doping, have you?"

"Oo! Grandma! What big eyes you've got! What would you say if I told you I had?"

"I . . . I don't know," stammered Hetty. "It sounds awful to me."

"When you have seen more of life . . ." began Baby-face loftily, but broke off suddenly and slid from the dressing-table. "I must fly!" she said and whirled out of the room.

Immediately, though, she put her golden head round the door and said . . .

"You needn't be *too* shocked; I haven't," and went out again.

CHAPTER XII

In January, Ben Jones came to town on business for his firm, and as a matter of course, Hetty spent all available time with him, so Baby-face, though not forgotten, was pushed to the background of her mind.

She had not seen Ben for a year, but once they were together again, it seemed to her that they had never been separated. They seemed to start again, exactly where they had left off. Ben had always been that kind of friend. There were never any disconcerting changes in him to be reckoned with. The first time he came to tea, she said to him:

"You've got a new suit," exactly as if yesterday was the day of their last meeting.

And he answered simply:

"Trenchard's gave me a rise at Christmas." Which was so typical of him, that Hetty felt for a moment that they were back in the old stone-yard.

They had a great deal to talk about, but, as usual between these two, it was chiefly Hetty who did the talking, while Ben listened. And even when he talked, it was mostly about herself and her affairs. As these at this time were to her most absorbing topics, she failed to notice that the conversation was one-sided.

Suddenly remembering Baby-face one day, she broke into something he was saying, with:

"Oh, Ben; I've been meaning to ask you . . . What do you think about doping and all that sort of thing?"

This, out of a clear sky, took him aback; it was a moment before he answered:

"I suppose it's as good a way of destroying yourself as any other."

"It *is* destructive, isn't it? It's stupid to play about with it and experiment, isn't it?"

"A mug's game."

"Even if you're strong-willed?"

"Isn't the will the first thing dope attacks?"

"I don't know. But it must be, I should think, because people can't stop once they get started . . . It's awful, isn't it? I mean, once your will's destroyed where are you?"

"Absolutely at the mercy of your craving."

Their young eyes met gravely as they discussed the question.

"But why, Hetty?" he asked finally.

"Oh, one hears all sorts of things talked about at Cassim's; someone was glorifying that sort of thing, and I've been wondering about it . . . Ben, did your father ever give you any sort of standards to go by? To *live* by, I mean?"

Ben shook his head.

"Never a thing. Bless your heart, he never *has* had more than the trail of a thought on the earth at all, and that's not much good as anchorage."

"But Ben, you've *got* standards," she insisted.

"Oh yes . . . in a sort of way."

"How did you get them?"

"Picked 'em up here and there, I suppose. I heard a man say once: "Preach the gospel of physical fitness, and you can cut the moral talk." That isn't romantic, I know, but I think it's effective."

"Well, it 'ud keep you from doing any of the destructive things, wouldn't it."

Ben nodded.

"If you can get the values sorted out and fixed steady enough to stand by you . . ." he paused a moment, then added, "when things are difficult."

"I shall remember that, Ben," she said quickly. "And I'll tell her, too."

"Who?"

"The girl who was talking about these things at Cassim's."

Hetty did not get a chance to tell Baby-face of Ben's quite simple creed immediately, for it was another month before Baby-face came to Cassim's again.

At the end of that time she whirled into the dressing-room just as Hetty was leaving. She was flushed, and her eyes were very

bright. She came in on tiptoe, caught Hetty by the shoulders, and whispered:

"I want you to come out with me . . . will you?"

"Out with you?" echoed Hetty. "Where to?"

"Supper and . . . Oh, come along . . . Don't hang things up . . . Be a sporty girl, now . . ."

It was something more than an invitation. There was a tone in it that suggested a favour asked as well as a kindness bestowed . . .

There was, too, an odd excitement about the gay little girl, which came through to Hetty, and set her heart quickening. The place, the hour and her early morning tiredness gave the scene a curious, unreal air. She felt suddenly all on edge.

"What is it? Where to?" she asked, again.

"Oh just for a little harmless fun . . . Don't be such a prim old stick; I could make a real smart girl of you . . . You say you're out for style . . . well, come on then . . ."

Hetty stood irresolute; a sense of adventure caught her, for all the sober thinking she had been putting in lately. The unknown was ahead of her, and things had been dull lately . . . The alluring "something new" beckoned . . .

"I . . . I don't know," she equivocated . . .

Baby-face pushed her away, pettishly. "All right, I'll go by myself," she said, and moved over to the door.

Hetty's heart beat faster yet.

This reckless, cherub-eyed girl repelled her and allured her; and she stood, held back by one feeling and urged forward by the other . . . Why shouldn't she be able to fling off every care and responsibility just for an evening, as Baby-face could? Why shouldn't she give herself up to excitement and pleasure; why shouldn't her feet dance as lightly carefree as the little feet of this spoilt, over-moneyed, extravagant girl . . .?

It was all very well for Ben to talk about keeping your sense of values . . . Ben, who never wanted any of the things that were out of his reach . . . Who had no yearnings, no aspirations, no restlessness . . . She ran after Baby-face and caught her arm . . .

"I'll go with you . . ." she said breathlessly, and Baby-face turned to her with something like relief in her eyes.

"Oh angel!" she sighed, gratefully, "I knew you were a sporty girl. Hurry up, I've got a taxi. Honestly I *did* want someone to go with me . . ."

A minute later they went out to the taxi. Baby-face gave the driver some inaudible instructions and got in beside Hetty; the taxi moved off.

Baby-face put a hand through Hetty's arm and moved nearer with a cuddly movement that made her think of Bella.

Excitement held them both tuned to a noisy pitch; they talked and laughed and sang little snatches of song, as the taxi slid through the lighted streets . . .

Hetty gave way to the mood; let it sway her; her eyes were as bright as the eyes of Baby-face; her cheeks as pink; her smile as gay . . .

Presently Baby-face began to shew signs of slight nervousness. Her excitement became still more hectic; she looked anxiously out of the window, first on one side, then on the other. Her face paled, leaving just a spot of vivid colour in each cheek, where she had rouged, so that she looked strange.

She cuddled a little closer to Hetty, almost as if she were just a touch afraid . . .

"Isn't it huge?" she said in a whisper . . . "I've always liked you, and I've always thought that when this day really came, I'd get you to go along with me . . . One feels one wants . . . someone with one, don't you know? And you'll try it, too, won't you?"

"Try what?" asked Hetty.

"Sh! not so loud. You have to be so careful . . . Very likely all the plain-clothes men at Scotland Yard are cueing up to catch us as it is. . . ."

"What?" There was a sharp note in Hetty's voice now.

Baby-face came closer still . . .

"It's a smoking party, darling . . . Sh! *Opium*. . . . They arrange the room just like a Limehouse den, and everyone lies round on cushions and smokes opium. Sometimes they sniff cocaine or heroin or something, and drink all sorts of marvellous things that aren't allowed . . . Gerald is going to fix my pipe for me. He says it'll make me sick, very likely, but that's only

just at first . . . And I'm not to mind . . . I think I *shall* mind being sick . . . I think anybody would mind that . . . But I'm going to stick it . . . because I want to be an honest sensationalist . . . Gerald says . . ."

But Hetty wasn't listening.

She rounded on Baby-face, pushing her away . . .

"It's . . . it's *that!* And you never told me! You said it was to be just . . ."

"Sh! I know . . . But I was afraid you wouldn't come if I told you. . . . I wanted you to be with me . . . It'll be all right . . . Just do exactly as Gerald tells you, when we meet him . . . He won't really let the police . . ."

But again Hetty was not listening. She was horrified. Her high excitement came tumbling headlong down, leaving her feeling stript and cold . . .

Through this confusion of emotion, she seemed suddenly to hear Ben's voice, as it had sounded, slow and measured, when he had said:

"Preach the gospel of physical fitness . . ." And here she was bound on an adventure that started out by making you sick! She felt a little sick already, with the abrupt revulsion of feeling . . .

Why had she ever listened to this feather-headed little fool . . .? And what was she to do . . .? Baby-face was a fool and a feather-head, but obviously she was Hetty's responsibility this evening. Besides Baby-face cuddled close in a way that reminded Hetty of Bella . . . She leaned back into her corner and prayed for the power to think quickly.

And it was granted . . . She found herself planning deliberately and clearly.

Suddenly she sat forward and said:

"Look here, if it's a party, I must go home and put on some party clothes . . . I must at least have a—a cloak . . ."

Baby-face protested; but Hetty was firm.

"You can't ask me to face all your swanky friends like this . . ." she insisted.

Baby-face continued to grumble, but Hetty re-directed the driver and took no notice of her.

When the taxi drew up outside Gandini's, Baby-face said pettishly:

"Ill wait, but for the love of Mike do *hurry* . . ."

"Come up with me," said Hetty. "I've got to change my shoes . . . I'll be a minute or two . . . Besides . . ." she leaned and whispered: "Don't you think it will be more discreet to dismiss this taxi and take another . . .? It . . . it . . . might help to cover our tracks . . ."

"Oo; yes . . ." whispered Baby--face, the intrigue catching her again. "I never thought of that. Gerald told me to be *awfully* careful . . ." She bundled out on the pavement in the wake of Hetty, paid the driver and followed Hetty upstairs.

Once in the sitting-room, she started chattering:

"Do you live here all by yourself? Oh, I wish I had a place of my own! One is so . . . fettered . . . at home . . . How can I be an honest experimentalist when father is so . . . old-fashioned? Gerald doesn't always seem to quite understand how difficult it is . . . I wish I could come and live with you . . . So I could see Gerald whenever I wanted to . . . This is a sweet little room . . . So lovely and *free*. Freedom is the greatest thing in the world, isn't it? Just to be *free!*" She stood in the middle of the room and spread out her arms ecstatically; then broke off suddenly and the posture crumpled . . .

"What are you doing?' she demanded sharply.

Hetty was locking the door, and having locked it, she took the key from the keyhole and put it into her bag. And having done that she leaned back against the door, limp with relief and said:

"Now, my dear, you can sniff the face powder, drink the kerosene out of my bedroom lamp and smoke anything you like till you're *kippered,* but this is as near to a dope party as you get to-night . . ."

Baby-face looked at Hetty, and her pretty face went blank; a little foolish.

"You . . . You've locked me in . . ." she stammered on a note of unbelieving question.

"Just that," Hetty assured her.

Baby-face stared a moment longer, and then the flare came. She stormed and blazed and ranted, but Hetty remained unaffected. She had too strong a feeling that Baby-face was not

the only one who had escaped a danger, to mind much what happened, now that the escape had been made . . .

"How dare you? How dare you? You wretched, interfering, presumptuous girl!" cried Baby-face.

"Don't be an utter little idiot," advised Hetty.

"I tell you I'm going to that party."

"And I tell you you're not."

This entirely unprofitable argument ran a hot course for a minute or so.

Then Baby-face ran to the window, fumbled savagely with the unfamiliar catch, and flung it open.

"I'm going to call a policeman," she said warningly over her shoulder.

"Call loud, because we are a long way up," said Hetty, and of course Baby-face didn't call at all. She came back into the middle of the room and stamped her dainty little feet, clenched her pretty little hands to fists, ground her teeth and made a noise in her throat that sounded like:

"Grrrrr . . .'

Hetty thought of the anger of a Persian kitten and laughed. It was a shaky laugh, for she was not feeling nearly as cool and steady as she was trying to appear.

Then she left the door, took Baby-face firmly by the shoulders and thrust her into a chair. Baby-face began to whimper. Hetty shook her impatiently.

"Come on now; get down to tacks," she said.

"But he'll be waiting!" wailed Baby-face.

"Let him wait."

"But he'll be so angry."

"Let him be angry."

"What will he think of me?"

"What he thinks of you doesn't matter; it's what I happen to think of him, that is going to decide things this evening; and I think he's just about the lowest thing that crawls."

There was another shower of sparks from Baby-face at that; but seeing that they had no effect upon Hetty, she crumpled back into the chair suddenly and looked up wiltingly.

"All right, then—what am I to do?" she said.

"Tell me who you are, first," said Hetty.

After a second's hesitation Baby-face told.

"Felicity Wicke, daughter of . . ."

Hetty waved a hand.

"Wicke's Weeklies . . . I know. Come along then, I'm going to take you safely home to dad."

But Felicity fairly trembled at the mere idea.

"You don't know dad, or you wouldn't talk so calmly. He doesn't even know I've ever been to Cassim's. I get out of my bedroom window on to the balcony and there's a fire escape leads down to the garden. . . . After I'm supposed to be in bed."

"And you get back the same way, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Well, there's nothing for it but to face father."

"You won't tell him I was at Cassim's?"

"I may have to. I'm not going to promise anything."

"Oh . . . Oh *hell* . . ." said Baby-face, tragically.

Ten minutes later they were on their way to the house of Gregory Wicke.

It was a big, greystone house, in one of the quiet streets behind Park Lane. At one side was a strip of lawn, a flight of stone steps, a stone baluster and a flagged terrace. From this terrace rose the fire escape, up to the roof. The crisp moonlight shewed this clearly. To the height of a window in the second story, the escape was disguised in luxurious creeper; the window was the window of her bedroom, Felicity explained, and she had always found the creeper most useful, as a screen.

As Hetty and Felicity stepped from the taxi that had brought them, a car swung into the street from the opposite end and stopped, bonnet to bonnet with the taxi. Out of the car stepped Gregory Wicke himself.

The taxi moved off, the car went, garage-wards, down a side street, and father and daughter confronted each other on the pavement, with only Hetty and the moon for audience.

"Lissie," said Gregory Wicke, "*what* are you doing here?" His voice was ominous.

Gregory Wicke was square and squat, with a colour scheme that was a little inclined to purple. He'd a thick, fur-lined coat

over evening clothes and looked warm, well-fed and prosperous. At the moment, he also looked fierce; very.

Felicity decided to be cheeky.

"Just going home, old daddy," she answered pertly, "which is what you appear to be doing yourself."

"And your friend?" Gregory Wicke turned the keen eyes that made all the staffs of all the Wicke Weeklies tremble, on to Hetty. They made Hetty tremble too.

"I just came to see Miss Wicke home," she said.

"Then *see* her home," he retorted, eyeing them both suspiciously. "She can't be said to be home out here on the pavement. *See* her home . . . See her home . . ."

He waved them towards the stately front door, rather as if he were shooing refractory chickens into a coop, and Hetty and Felicity ran up the steps before him; Felicity was beginning to whimper.

Gregory Wicke opened the door and shooed them into the hall. Having shed his outer raiment into the hands of a pale-faced, immovable man, he then chivvied them up a wide, black marble staircase and into a cumbersomely furnished study.

Here he turned and faced them again.

"Why aren't you in bed, Lissy?" he asked. Felicity, whimpering badly now, wanted to know how she could possibly be in bed when she was standing right here in his study.

Hetty, while she was sorry for Felicity, couldn't help a feeling of contempt for the pert, stupid quibble. Gregory Wicke looked at her now.

"Having seen my daughter home," he said, his square face grimly set, "perhaps you'll be good enough to explain?"

Hetty did her best for Felicity; she tendered an explanation that covered the situation without giving embarrassing details.

Gregory Wicke accepted it, or at any rate, appeared to; he sent Felicity to bed, and Felicity went, with a thankful heart, and in a hurry. Hetty was beginning to think that the worst was over, when Gregory Wicke turned back to her, his face thunderous, and said:

"Now then; the truth, please. What have you and my daughter been up to?"

Hetty saw then that the real business was only just beginning;

she told herself that she was in for it, but she braced herself to meet whatever might be coming and determined not to allow this square, squat, forceful man to frighten her. He was bullying; and that always called up all the fight in Hetty's composition.

It was a pity, in a way, because it set her against him and prevented their understanding each other as early as they could have done.

She faced him squarely, but the situation was a little difficult; she had Felicity to think of.

"Your daughter came up to my rooms and I brought her home afterwards," she answered.

"H'm. What's your name?" His dictatorial manner only stiffened Hetty's opposition.

"Hetty Carol."

"What do you do?"

"I work for my living."

"What work do you do?'

"I'm a cloak-room attendant."

"Where?"

"At Cassim's Night Club."

"Was that where you met my daughter?"

"Yes."

"So she was at Cassim's?"

"Yes." She was not going to tell more than she had to.

"What for?"

"To have supper and to dance, I suppose. I only saw her in the dressing-room."

"Who was she with?"

"To-night?"

"Then there have been other nights?"

Hetty bit her lip.

"Yes," she admitted.

"How many?"

"I don't just remember. Several."

"Who was she with to-night?"

"She was alone."

Gregory Wicke turned away; then back again with a sudden aggressive jerk.

"Do you understand that she is strictly forbidden to go to such places?"

"I rather gathered that."

"And yet you encouraged her . . . to disobey me?"

"Oh, no. I didn't encourage her."

"Then who did? Who did?" A very celebrated temper was rapidly rising beyond the point of being controlled. Hetty saw that; but nothing on earth could have stopped the answer that suddenly presented itself upon her lips.

"I think you did." The words seemed to speak themselves.

"What?"

"I think you did."

Their eyes met and held, but Gregory Wicke's face was working; temper was nearly choking him.

Hetty added:

"It doesn't seem much good keeping her so strictly . . . She won't stand it . . . It's against . . . Oh, I don't know . . . Against what's thought and felt . . .and . . . *wanted* . . ." She broke off, drawing a breath and the scene that followed was one that she never forgot. She had seen something of Felicity's temper, but Felicity had only inherited the overweight of her father's. As a child's pop-gun is to a Big Bertha, so was Felicity's temper to her father's.

It was customary, at the offices of the Wicke Weeklies, when word went round that "the old Wicke was alight," for heads of departments to quake and for page boys to shiver their very buttons off; so it was no wonder that Hetty felt a little over-awed by the booming voice, the clenched fists, the purple face and the stamping feet, that were the usual symptoms of this celebrated temper. But presently her awe subsided. A man in a temper may at first seem rather like Jove and his lightnings, but ultimately and essentially he is a foolish example of lack of control. When he roared out that he knew very well what Night Clubs stood for; and better still precisely the kind of girls who worked at them, Hetty's patience gave out.

"Do you," she said, suddenly, and with force, "express that sort of opinion of girls in your weeklies?"

She had never before realized the value of a nice-toned voice; but after the storm that had been threatening to lift the ceiling,

the sound of her own voice, incisive and melodious, came, even to her own ears, as something quite surprisingly telling.

It told with Gregory Wicke, too. His roaring died down and he stared at Hetty.

This triumph made her reckless; she pursued the advantage she had won.

"Because if you do," she went on, "I can't help thinking that it's rank bad business."

Gregory Wicke gasped.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"Exactly what I say," retorted Hetty. "Why should you condemn me because I work at a Night Club?"

"Touch pitch and you'll be defiled," said Gregory Wicke. Hetty's grey eyes were rather flashing stars, then.

"Do you realize how offensive you are being? What makes you think that you have any right to be offensive? You may have opinions about girls who work at Night Clubs, but your opinion isn't necessarily *knowledge*."

That jarred Gregory Wicke; it was the sort of thing that, at the very height of a brilliant and dictatorial career, he most definitely was not used to.

"And," went on Hetty, a good deal warmed up, "you're talking nonsense, when you speak of me encouraging your daughter to behave as she does . . . She came to Cassim's because she wanted to. I'd never seen her, never heard of her, till she walked into the dressing-room and gave me her cloak to look after. If I ran papers for girls, I'd try to get to know a little *about* girls, first. Why, you don't even know the first things about your own daughter!"

"How dare you speak to me like this!" exploded Gregory Wicke.

"Why shouldn't I? . . . I'm not afraid of you. I was just at first; but I'm not now . . . Besides I think you ought to know what I can tell you . . ." Hetty was not speaking with the calm assurance that her words seem to imply. She was jerking the sentences out, breathlessly, rather as a very earnest little girl might do; Gregory Wicke was held by the earnestness of her. He stood before her, his feet apart the better to support his stocky figure; bull-dog head thrust forward; eyes and lips grim.

"Well?" he said.

And Hetty told him the story of her acquaintance with Felicity. She told the story calmly enough, but at the finish broke out impetuously:

"You don't know the first thing about that daughter of yours . . .! You know so little of her, that night after night she's getting down the fire escape and gadding about with a rotter who calls himself an experimentalist. You know so little of her that this same rotter has been able to take her to Limehouse and goodness knows where beside, while you've thought her innocently in bed. You know so little of her that she had actually arranged to go to a dope party this evening . . . I could laugh when you talk as if I'd been leading her astray, when all the time it was *she* who tried to get *me* to go to this party with her, without telling me it was a dope party. . . . She just came and asked me to go out to supper with her, and I wanted to go . . . I wanted the fun of it . . . It's dull sometimes, being a cloak-room girl . . . I wanted to be able to dance and laugh and be as free as she was . . . But when I found it was to be a dope party . . . I . . .but I've told you all that . . . Only it's *funny* to hear you talking about a girl of my sort . . . and I could *laugh* . . . if it wasn't so awful . . . when all the time your girl might have been sniffing cocaine or smoking opium, or in the hands of the police, or *dead* . . . And you didn't even *know* . . ."

Her voice was shaking badly now, and she was on fire with what she was saying . . . A fire that was rather touchingly kept half quenched by the tears that welled into her eyes.

"I could laugh and laugh . . ." She stopped abruptly on a tremulous, quickly caught breath. It was the look in Gregory Wicke's face that had halted her; a terrible, heart-wringing look, that thrust the rising words back into her throat. His belligerent, bull-dog posture seemed to have crumpled suddenly and he sank into a chair as if he were old and infirm, his head bowed.

There was a long silence, then he looked up.

"This is true?" he asked, the question an odd mixture of courage and entreaty.

"Yes, true," she replied, and the tears overflowed and ran down her face.

Again there was silence; then Gregory Wicke rose heavily.

"Very well. That will do. I'll see Lissy in the morning. I'm grateful. And I apologise."

Hetty moved towards the door uncertainly, and stopped half way there.

"What are you going to do to her?" she asked abruptly.

"That is my affair," he answered, his square face set and sullen; the hint of further storms showing through the hurt misery of his eyes. Hetty escaped out on to the landing and he padded downstairs after her. He sent the pale-faced man for the car for Hetty and waited with her in silence till the car came round, then as she went through the front door, he said with sudden fresh violence:

"I've thanked you and I've apologised, but when I want advice as to how to run my papers or my family, I'll let you know. Good-night."

On the way home Hetty realised the inner significance of that; she had flicked his vanity.

"Queer," she mused, "that at such a time he should have stopped to worry about his vanity . . . People *are* a mix-up . . . They never can think, or say, or even *feel,* one thing at a time . . ." And she leaned back into the corner of the car, sighing tiredly.

The first, pale light of day was filtering through the white muslin curtains of her bedroom windows, when she at last got into bed and drifted into sleep.

CHAPTER XIII

After that, Baby-face was seen at Cassim's no more, and Hetty had a feeling that for her too Cassim's was finished. Some happenings beget that feeling. The Baby-face episode had left its mark upon Hetty. The sort of mark that is left by a menace that comes near, stares at you, threatens, slinks aside, and is gone . . .

Hetty, looking back at her behaviour in the taxi, as she had driven through the lighted streets, with Baby-face, in quest of excitement, saw it ruthlessly as a kind of tipsiness, and suffered, each time, the inevitable twinge of shame.

But it had shewn her what excitement-seeking might be, and where it could lead.

She more and more wanted to leave Cassim's.

She had Bella with her for a week during the summer holidays. For the rest of the time Bella was doing as she had done last summer; staying with her particular chum's people. Bella, Hetty discovered now, was growing up very quickly. She was fourteen and had grown a lot; her figure was becoming plump and full. She wore her clothes with considerable dash, and altogether had acquired an air of maturity which Hetty found rather odd. Hetty felt sometimes that *she* was the little sister. Bella's beauty too had changed; the babyish, dimpling plumpness was merging into a ripeness that would be heavy later on, but at present was amazingly vivid and striking. She attracted a great deal of attention, Hetty found, when they went out together; so much indeed and so noticeably from men, that Hetty wondered, struck by a sudden fear, whether Bella had any serviceable knowledge as to the fundamentals of sex attraction.

She broached the subject, with some diffidence, but Bella broke in with:

"Oh, I've known all about *that* sort of thing for ages."

And Hetty didn't quite know whether to feel relieved or not.

Bella gave her many surprises during that week. Also Bella gave her an additional reason for urgently desiring to leave Cassim's. She observed one day that she found it jolly awkward, when her friends questioned her about her sister, to have to confess that Hetty was a cloak-room attendant. So that when Bella went off to her holiday at the end of the week she left Hetty feeling more than ever restless and dissatisfied. But she remained at Cassim's for the simple reason that nothing else offered.

It was when, during that Autumn, Edmund Shale turned up again that she saw the first real gleam of hope ahead. He appeared suddenly and unheralded, as he always did.

After an exchange of news over the tea-table, he said:

"Like to write a play for me, Hetty?"

"I'd love to," she answered, not taking his question very seriously. "When shall I begin?"

"To-morrow, if you can," he said, and then she saw that he was quite serious. He explained further.

"It's a commission. I'm to get a hundred down on completion, and a royalty on receipts. I've got the whole thing worked out; it only needs to be put on paper . . . That's the part I want you to do. Will you?"

"Rather. But why don't you do it yourself?"

"Writing is manual labour and I'm not a manual labourer." She laughed.

"But I can't type," she warned him.

"Hetty, you're the only human I can think of who wouldn't drive me mad when I'm wrestling with words."

"Am I? I like that, awfully," she said quickly. "What time of day do you best like to work?"

"Morning and . . . Are you still at Cassim's?" he broke off to ask.

And that was where Hetty decided.

"I shall leave Cassim's," she said. "You were going to say that you liked working in the evening, weren't you?"

"Well, yes. I was . . ."

"Then just keep me going, and I'll do it."

"I oughtn't to let you . . . it's madness . . ."

"It'll mean madness to stay there any longer . . . You can't think how deadly tired I am of it, and how awful it is to feel that

I'm wasting time . . . It's all wrong, Edmund. It turns everything upside down . . . I'm up all night and in bed half the day . . . That's rottenly unwholesome. Besides it makes things difficult for Bella, me being a cloak-room girl . . ."

"What things?"

"Social things. I shall leave Cassim's anyway."

Shale allowed that to settle the question. Hetty left Cassim's and work on the play began.

They worked up in her homely little living-room, for Shale was living in rooms, at the time, which were far from homely.

He arrived round about nine o'clock each morning, and pacing to and fro dictated sometimes until past noon; then he took Hetty out to lunch—having previously borrowed the wherewithal from brother Robert, but Hetty didn't know this. Afterwards they would mouch around town or the park together till teatime. Sometimes he gave her tea at a teashop; sometimes she gave him tea at her rooms. Always, after tea, he left her and reappeared again at about eight, to dictate till the muse gave out.

Hetty enjoyed every minute of this untrammelled mode of existence . . . She was interested in Shale, and in his play, too, though she always felt that here something was lacking. But she volunteered no criticism; it was his creation, not hers.

But one evening Shale stopped suddenly in his pacing and said:

"What's the matter with it, Hetty?"

She looked up and answered promptly:

"The woman; Mary Tenby."

"But she's so absolutely *right*. That's the way women *do* behave."

"Yes, but she's all behaviour; she's not life. She does these things because you know women do these things; not because she can't help doing them herself."

He nodded.

"What am I to do?"

"I don't know. Fall in love, I suppose. You're too aloof."

"But you won't let me fall in love with you. And I don't think I could with anyone else."

She laughed.

"Nor could you with me, if it's a question of my letting you!"

"I believe I could. I get nearer to it with you than with any woman I've ever known, anyway."

"Oh, no; I'm nothing but another specimen to you. That's all. You go about like an old professor with a magnifying glass and a pin, and the rest of mankind is made up of all sorts of insects, and when you find one interesting enough, you pin him down and examine him through the glass. Your plays are like lovely collections of butterflies and beetles and hornets, with an occasional creepy-crawly, all neatly pinned out so that the audience can see, while you explain just how they behaved *when* they were alive. And your explanation is good and right and *fiendishly* understanding, but your characters aren't alive."

He stared down at her.

"They aren't talking," she added. "You are talking about them."

"Two years ago," he said slowly, "you were an inarticulate jumble of beauty and feeling. And now . . ."

"Oh, I've been through the school for deaf mutes since then," she answered flippantly.

"Where did you find it?"

"All around me, Edmund."

"You're horribly disconcerting."

"Why?"

"Because you've added brain to the beauty and the feeling; and the trinity is simply overwhelming."

"Well you told me to get it *here,*" she tapped her forehead.

He returned to work, but nothing went right. Then she was silent and he was silent, too; suddenly he laughed.

"If my falling in love's the only thing to save my poor Mary Tenby from utter woodenness, the case is hopeless."

"Why?" she asked.

"Well, for the past ten minutes or so, I've been watching the curve of the back of your neck, and the absolutely annihilating manner in which the little curls cluster upon it—a sort of bluey-black shadow on unimaginable white—and my utter outsider of a heart hasn't paid the ordinary homage of giving so much as a single hop. You'll have to write the damn woman yourself."

Hetty was scarcely equal to that, but all the same she did man-

age to *save* the woman. Beneath their discussions of her, poor "Mary Tenby" became an individual as well as a type. Somehow the breath of life was fanned into Shale's keen, analytical study of character.

Hetty wasn't aware of doing much towards it. What she did was too subtle to be catalogued; but Shale was under no delusion as to how much she had done, and when the hundred materialised, wanted to give her half. She wouldn't take it; but, since he wanted it really badly, *did* take twenty pounds and a dinner of celebration.

But those were the least part of the legacy left by the weeks of work with Shale; and a very much enhanced sense of how to use words was, perhaps, the greatest.

Hetty began to write again.

Twenty pounds, all in one lump, gave her a wonderful sense of security. She could free her mind of everything save the work she was striving to do.

She wrote short articles on things that interested her, and sent them speculatively to various papers. Her success was small; but she persevered and the few guineas she did make were tremendous encouragement. She clung on with all the determination in her, because she had come to believe in her power to write.

Her progress was duly reported in her letters to Ben; lively, descriptive letters, entirely different from the ones he wrote to her, which were brief and unexpansive, filled more often with her concerns than with his own.

It was when she met Gertrude Darcy, editress of *The Home Point of View*, that she really began to do any settled and steady writing.

She had sent an article to this paper, and after a week or two, received a letter asking her to go and see Miss Darcy.

She went full of hope; her head high among the rosy clouds of dreams.

Miss Darcy received her with great kindness. She was a rather masculine woman, with an almost Napoleonic head, wise eyes, and an unexpectedly pretty smile.

Having received her with great kindness, Miss Darcy then proceeded to dash Hetty's hopes to the ground by telling her that

the article she had submitted was not suitable for *The Home Point of View*.

"Then you don't want it?" said poor Hetty, dismayed.

"As it stands, I don't. Altered, I might. But will you try something fresh for me?" answered Miss Darcy.

Would she not! The invitation set Hetty's blood dancing again.

Miss Darcy then went into details as to what she wanted.

At the end of nearly three quarters of an hour, Hetty left.

"I'll do it," she said, enthusiastically. "Perhaps not just at first . . . but I'll do it. You've no idea how much you have shewn me. I feel like a thief, almost; going away so . . . so laden." She caught a little emotional breath. Miss Darcy smiled.

"It was all most freely given," she said, with a graciousness that was peculiarly her own.

Hetty *did* do it. It took her some time; a lot of ink and many interviews, for Gertrude Darcy believed in discussion. Moreover she had a never-old mind; which could still find interest in work she had been doing for twenty years.

"Somewhere between what you have done and what I think I want, is the absolutely right thing," she used to say, "and together, we'll arrive at it."

Once Hetty managed to satisfy Miss Darcy, she was safe for a certain amount of work for *The Home Point of View* each week, and her income maintained a small but steady average.

The day she wrote to Bella and told her that she could describe her sister to her friends as a writer, was one of her real red-letter days.

She free-lanced for a year and was then taken into *The Home Point of View* fold at a fixed salary, in return for which she did the *Social Chatter* pages regularly; and sometimes interviews with famous people. This terrified her nearly out of her wits at first, but she would not shew it, because she liked the work and found that it gave her a great deal of interesting experience. She met all sorts of people, of whom, hitherto she had only heard, and got through many doors—even if it *were* only in a professional capacity—that had been closed to her. She had to attend many different kinds of social function and gained a real, inside knowledge of the way in which the society machine worked.

Tag Street, the drabness of life as she had lived it in the Tag Street days, her pitiful little father, all seemed a long way behind her now. Although she still saw Herbert from time to time, she felt curiously distant from him, and had to remind herself that he was indeed her father. She wondered sometimes just why she should feel any fondness for him; yet she did; a fondness entirely separate from any other emotion.

One day when she went to see him, he greeted her with the news that Mrs. Carol had "done a bolt with some man."

Without waiting for any expression of feeling from Hetty, he wound up the story by saying: "And a good riddance, says I; a good riddance and be damned to her . . ."

His excitement was high that day; the loss of his wife spelled a glorious freedom for him; he was shockingly exultant.

"Who's the man?" Hetty asked. "That yellow-haired one?"

"Charlie Bates? Huh, there's bin half a dozen since 'im. How should *I* know who's the man?"

"What shall you do? Divorce her?"

"I shan't do nothing. Let her go to hell her own way; that's what I say. And that's the last of women for *me*, Het. The *last*. I got a good one first time, and I ought to 'ave known as that was my *share*."

That evening she wrote to Ben and told him about it.

"It was horrible," she wrote, "to see a man so deliriously joyful to be rid of his wife. Yet when you consider the wife, you have to admit that he shewed better judgment in being glad to get rid of her, than in ever having acquired her. I begin to think that I don't see how anyone *dare* marry. You hear of such a lot of awful marriages. And this 'home-life' question, Ben. What *is* home-life? What does it amount to? Has it ever been a real thing or is it just an amiable myth? My paper, of course, runs home-life *strong;* and it seems right and wholesome and sane; and lovely, too, on paper. But in real life, it seems to be the thing that most people are trying to get away from. I meet lots of girls now; writing girls and business girls; and the main idea of all of them seems to be to get away from home and to stay away. Their parents don't understand them; or they can't get on with their brothers and sisters; or housework is such a drudge. *Home* is just the dullest, or the most irritating spot on earth. It's either

stupefying monotony, or everlasting friction. I know the feeling. I wouldn't go back to housekeeping in Tag Street for anything. And when I asked dad what he was going to do now Mrs. Carol has left him, I was petrified with fright that he'd suggest living with me! Absolutely petrified! And when he told me he was going into furnished rooms, so that he could be on his own, independent of everyone, I was never so relieved in my life! And he's my father, Ben! Well, that's wrong you know. I'm wrong or *he's* wrong or we're *both* wrong . . . Something is, anyway; but I know it would just drive me crazy to have to live with him again. I don't seem made for family life any more than other girls. And what does anyone get out of it? What do all the women in Tag Street get out of it? Eternally washing up dishes so that they can be made messy again. What did *my* mother get out of it? About fourteen years with dad; and having me and Bella. She was nearly always tired; never really well; and she died when she was only thirty-seven. Honestly, Ben, I can't see the force of it. There are so many wonderful and interesting things to do and to see and to think; and home doesn't seem to give you a chance. You can't launch ships in the domestic bath tub."

To which Ben answered with characteristic brevity:

"All the same, home's all right."

Which, Hetty thought, was typical of dear, plodding, humdrum old Ben. There were times when she missed him, but she was too busy to miss him much; times when she wanted to see him quite badly, but she was too busy to want anything for long. She felt that she had definitely mounted a rung or two of the social ladder. She was in a new world, and there was so much to do, and to think about, and to plan. In her first elation she felt she had left everyone she had ever known far behind. Painstaking, unambitious Ben would never aspire to this world. She had entered it; professionally, she admitted in her less elated moments, but she did not always mean to hold her place upon a professional basis only.

Her interviewing work, of which she was doing more and more, took her to all sorts of people—great soldiers, sailors, actors, novelists, poets, film stars, business men and artists. People who had—strictly within the law—made any sensational leap to fame.

A fashionable chef, a "freak" dress designer, a noted lady-housemaid. . . . Once it took her even to Monsieur Fontaine, whose hair-dressing establishment, off Bond Street, had caused a stir. Once to a would-be channel swimmer.

And once to Alan Dacres.

Now she had no idea when she set out that it was taking her to Alan Dacres. She had imagined that it was taking her into the presence of a real, live member of parliament. But when she had waited nearly half an hour in an ante-room, the door opened and she was confronted by Alan Dacres.

Alan Dacres was the younger son of a younger son, and grandson of a somewhat impoverished earl. He was related to a dazzling number of titles; had done brilliantly at Cambridge and had just embarked upon a political career by becoming one of the secretaries in the outfit of this particular member of parliament. He was the sort of young man for whom everyone predicted the brightest possible future. Besides all this, he was also, and indestructibly, Alan Dacres; a personality of his own, apart from anything he had achieved or was expected to achieve. His duty at the present moment was to explain to Hetty that his chief was unavoidably unable to see her, and—if he carried out his instructions—to "get rid of her."

He began doing this, as a matter of course. He had done it so often that he had acquired a most effective technique. But he didn't do it to-day. Somehow—he never knew just how, nor did she—they began talking of things not at all related to real live members of parliament, nor to special interviews. Afterwards, remembering what they really had talked about, he had to confess to himself that it was the sunshine on the houses opposite! Which really did not seem believable; he had never talked of sunshine to any other interviewer he had been told off to "get rid of."

Neither had he ever thought of any other interviewer, or any other woman at all, as he couldn't help thinking of Hetty after she had gone. The conversation about sunshine had lasted perhaps ten minutes. Remembering back, he knew that he had been guilty of trying to make it last longer. He needn't have bothered to do that, for they were destined to meet again quite soon.

They met at a dance, to which she had been sent in search of

Social Chatter and to which he had gone determining to stay no longer than he decently must. But the first eyes to meet his, as he went towards the ball-room, were Hetty's starry, temperamental eyes, and he felt that he was going to enjoy himself after all.

He went straight to her, and did not try to disguise the fact that it was an immense pleasure to him to see her again. They stood in an almost deserted corridor talking.

Looking up into the serious, sweet-eyed face of Alan Dacres, Hetty felt a rebellious wish that she were not here in the interests of Miss Darcy's social chatter page. She wished she were here on the same footing that Alan Dacres was here. When he suggested dancing, it was with a touch of pique that she referred to the professional aspect of her presence here.

"I'm only here for the paper. So, you must regard me as not being here at all."

There was a tilt of defiance in the poise of her head as she looked up at him.

His smile was understanding and friendly, and made her realize that bravado was wholly out of place. The reason of her presence made no sort of difference to him. The only thing that mattered was that she was here. She recognised this, taken aback by it. But the explanation was simple enough. Whatever he might have done, whatever experiences he might have gone through, he was, by nature, essentially a one-woman man. And he had met the one woman.

CHAPTER XIV

The future, for Hetty, held quite a lot of Alan Dacres. He introduced her to his mother, who received her guardedly and asked her to luncheon when no one of any real importance was going to be present. Hetty was alert enough to guess this, but she did not mind. One couldn't expect everything at once. It was something to lunch with the Honourable Mrs. Arthur Dacres without having to get "copy" out of the occasion.

Alan was the third man to be allowed up in the little Soho sitting-room, and he made as frequent use of the privilege as his duties and her work permitted. She had been shy, at first, of his seeing the plain simplicity of her attic, but that sort of thing didn't seem to touch him at all. It filled her with triumph sometimes to think of his friendship, and sometimes, troubled her, rather. She wondered whether he knew that his mother asked her to luncheon only when no one of importance was going to be present. . . .

"We like being together, don't we?" he demanded when once she remonstrated with him.

"Yes," she admitted.

"Then why need we disguise the fact? Life's not long enough for pretences over things that really matter."

"No, it isn't," she admitted again. "And yet it seems inevitable that we should pretend."

"Pretend as much as you like with other people, but not with me."

"Are you really so much more important than other people?"

"To you, I am. Only a certain number of people can be really important to any one person. It's a foolish waste of time to pretend with those who are among that certain number."

His argument was so much a matter of fact and so little a matter of vanity that she gave him the truth undisguised.

"You are important to me; tremendously. In all sorts of ways that you probably haven't guessed."

"Which ways are those?"

She paused a moment, then.

"When one has had no sort of education between a board school and life itself, the friendship of a man of your social standing has a very great importance."

He nodded.

"Yes, that's understandable."

"You are curing my shyness; taking me into your world and shewing me how to make it mine. You don't know what it means to be trying to rise from—nothing."

"You don't have to try so hard or to mind so much," he assured her. "You're *real;* real all through. That's the greatest thing."

"Alan, wouldn't it make any difference to your friendship for me if you saw my home and . . . and my father . . .? I've told you what he is."

He held out a hand and took hers, and held it in a cool, friendly way.

"Hetty, it's as snobbish to rub it in too often that your father is a printer's traveller, as it is to rub it in too often that your . . . well, that your grandfather is an earl . . . See what I mean?"

She crimsoned to her hair and he saw her face quiver; then she laid her free hand closely over his and said:

"I see. What an angel you are, Alan!"

Their friendship ran a somewhat palpitating course for several weeks.

Bright early June sunshine was touching the world with the peculiar pristine gold of spring, when they met—accidentally this time—in the Park. It was just before lunch and Alan was walking home. They fell into step together and walked through the changing light and shade beneath the trees.

Perhaps the unexpectedness of this meeting disconcerted them, for after the first exchange of greetings, silence held between them.

And then quite suddenly, quite simply and with great earnestness, he asked her to marry him.

And there was silence again.

Hetty was taken aback. Naturally the possibility of this had occurred to her, but his friendship had been so entirely frank that she had not let the thought become very definite. Even now, casting up a quick, disconcerted glance, she saw nothing in his unhandsome, sweet-eyed face, that remotely suggested emotion.

"I . . . I thought we were . . . just friends," she said, at last.

"Well, of course we are friends. I should not want to marry any woman with whom I could not be completest friends."

"But . . . do you . . . *love* me, too?"

"Yes. I love you in every way, for everything, with all the strength of which I am capable."

"I'd no idea. I'm sorry . . ."

"That means—what?"

"I . . . don't know."

It occurred to her, through the sudden confusion of her thoughts, that she had never been unsure before.

With Kelly she had been only too sure in one way; with every man since—and there had been one or two—only too sure in another. With Alan Dacres had suddenly arisen uncertainty.

"I don't know," she repeated.

"You don't love me?"

They reached the Hyde Park Corner Gate and passed on into the long, straight stretch of Piccadilly.

"I loved a man once," she said suddenly.

He turned his head and looked down at her.

"Yes?"

"Oh well . . . I was just thinking that I don't feel the same for you."

"No; you couldn't. And I should not want you to."

"But I'm not sure that I could love again at all. I'm not sure that he didn't kill all that."

"I'm sure he didn't. Whether you can care for me or not, I'm sure he didn't."

She drew a breath.

"Are you? I'd like to think that . . . It's so stupid to think

of missing what seems to be a big thing. I *want* to be able to love . . . And I'd like . . . I'd like to love *you*."

She looked up at him with thoughtful eyes.

Quite suddenly another, less personal question struck her.

"But your mother wouldn't like you to marry me," she said.

"Mother likes you."

"For myself yes; but as a possible wife for you?"

"She wouldn't interfere."

"Are you sure? She's ambitious for you."

"I'm ambitious for myself. I want to be able to do some of the things that seem to me to need doing."

"Should I . . . hamper you?"

"You *could* do nothing but help."

"How?"

"By being your understanding self."

"By being real?"

"Yes."

"Honestly?"

"Will my assurance satisfy you?"

"Yes. Unless you overlook faults because you love me?"

"No. I dont think I love that way."

"Does your mother know that I am nobody?"

"Yes. She asked me one day, and I told her. I thought you wouldn't mind."

"I'd rather. I'll never attempt to get through on pretence. That wouldn't be getting through, would it? If people can't accept me for what I am, knowing what I have been, then I haven't won out, have I?"

"Don't narrow your ambitions to winning out in my particular caste. You have gifts too big for that. The sort of gifts that artists have. Artists, real ones, are not restricted to any one class of society. They mix with all and are accepted by all. It's the particular franchise that their artisthood gives them. Well, I believe you can do that. You can win out with all types of people, which is a far bigger thing than winning out with only one type. So don't make the mistake of setting your goal posts *too* near together."

"You're right," she said quickly. "What is the guide?"

"Go for the *real* people, all the world over."

"Is that what *you* are going to do?"

He nodded.

"However high you rise?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I like that. It's fine. I'd like to help . . ."

"I'd like you to help. Want it more than I've ever wanted anything. Will you think it over?"

"Yes," she said, a little breathlessly.

Hetty left Alan Dacres with all her thoughts in a whirl and they remained in a whirl for days. The realization of an ambition isn't always easy to bear steadily. And here was the realization of an ambition. Here was the prince of whom Sally Silver had spoken. Here he was; and not only — metaphorically — that prince, but a real man, into the bargain. He had asked Hetty to marry him. That sheer fact proved to her that she had achieved what she had striven towards; it was a proud ascent upon her difficult endeavours, this was the final justification of those plain brown curtains which the second Mrs. Carol had so despised; of her striving on behalf of Bella; of her efforts at self-improvement. Crude efforts she knew, but justified now, in this blossoming to success. Even the scallop shell incident ceased to be a memory of bitterness, and became just part of her initiation; all the small, keen wounds and shames of learning took their places, now, in the scheme of things that had led to this, her triumph.

Alan Dacres, grandson of an earl, had asked her to marry him.

He was everything she could have asked. He fitted her plans so perfectly that he might have been made to order. And she had just to say one word to make him hers; him and his world; that world she had looked at from afar and vowed to conquer. One word, and those ships she had dreamed of would be making such a mighty great armada on the social sea, that the ships of Helen of Troy would seem like a fleet of fishing smacks by comparison!

Just one word; and yet she hesitated to speak it.

Because, whatever illusions of youth she had shed during the past few years, her honesty had come through intact, and she knew that she did not love Alan Dacres as he loved her. If she

said yes to his proposal, she would be giving a word in exchange for his living heart.

That was where Hetty found herself up against temptation. She wanted to marry Dacres. She wanted the position, the social distinction and security, that he could give her. She wanted the world he offered. She wanted to complete her triumph; to feel the crown of her success upon her brow. She wanted it for herself and she wanted it for Bella. She most desperately wanted it.

After all, she could give so much. Warm friendliness; earnest desire to help; true admiration; loyalty. Surely all these gifts were near enough to being the gift of love.

Perhaps they were the first beginnings of love. Must she hesitate to take all he offered because, although she could give so much, she could not give that last little fraction of emotion which would have made her feeling equal his? Which would have made it that mysterious something which is beyond admiration and respect—love?

How much did it count, any way, that misleading, turbulent, unreliable emotion which could make you crazy for an out-and-out rotter, and leave you cool in face of the love of a real man? What was the value of an emotion so indiscriminating? If she gave all she had to give, surely that would be fair?

The arguments kept her in a ferment. She must not be misunderstood in this. It must not be thought that she would have coveted social rank only for its own sake and that she would have taken her crown of success from the hands of any man who happened to be in a position to set it upon her head.

She wouldn't. Her sense of values was too discriminating a thing for that.

Since the fading of her first bitterness against Kelly it had become important that her prince should also be a man.

It was in the very faultlessness of Dacres that her temptation lay; in his sweetness and honesty; in his fearlessness of thought and action; in his high ideals and lofty aspirations.

It was because he was so *right* in every way.

She argued it round and about, but could come to no conclusion.

It was some time before she saw him again. By tacit con-

sent they remained apart. Then she met him one afternoon just as he was leaving his chief's house.

"What a jolly accident," he said, greeting her. They fell into step and headed for the main thoroughfares.

"Not quite an accident," she confessed.

"Did you come to meet me?"

"Not quite so deliberately as that. But I knew that this was a likely spot and a likely hour—didn't I?"

"Yes."

"And I sort of found myself at the spot, and at the hour, and . . . here we are. It was half accident and half not."

"Had tea?"

"No."

"Let's have it, then."

They found a tea place, an unostentatious shop which Hetty thought it very typical of him to have chosen, and were presently seated on opposite sides of a small tea and cake laden table.

Here they sat and talked for nearly half an hour, about everything under the sun but the question that was uppermost in both their minds. But just as they were preparing to leave, he said suddenly:

"Wait a minute. Tell me what I want to know first."

She had half risen, but sat down again, her heart pounding.

"Do you still want to know . . . anything?" she asked nervously.

"Is it likely that I should have changed so quickly?" he challenged her.

"No, I didn't mean that . . . I'm . . . nervous. I've thought and thought so much that . . ." she broke off.

"Any decision?"

She shook her head.

He was silent a moment; then,

"Is the question so delicately in the balance as that? Such utter touch and go?"

"Yes."

"Can you tell me exactly what you have thought? What you have felt? It . . . means a lot to me."

His sincerity banished her nervousness, for sincerity is only answerable *by* sincerity, and she told him what he wanted to

know. Her doubts and thoughts and feelings. Just how nearly she loved him; and just how, by a maddening fraction of emotion, she didn't.

He listened thoughtfully, his nice eyes on her face. There was silence again when she had finished speaking, and again it was he who broke it.

"Do you *want* to care about me, Hetty?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

She coloured.

"If I explain will you never misunderstand?"

"I'll try not to."

"But it may be difficult for you not to. Things sound so . . . awful . . . sometimes, when you say them."

"Don't you think we'll have to risk that?"

"I suppose we must."

"I mean, we've got to have things square between us, haven't we?"

She nodded.

"Then risk it, Hetty." He smiled slightly.

She told him, then, to the very last word, her face flushed, but her voice plucky.

"It sounds awful," she finished. "I knew it would. But it isn't really so awful as it sounds. It isn't *only* because of worldly things that I want to marry you. It isn't, *really*."

"No, I believe it isn't," he answered slowly.

"You don't sound quite convinced."

"I'm . . . Hetty, dear, I'm *hurt*," he broke out. "I've no right to be; you've told me only what is true, and I want above all things your complete honesty. But truth can hurt."

"I know that. I'm sorry."

"No, don't be sorry. Be glad that there's this truth between us. I'm going to be; when the first cut stops hurting."

"But, Alan, it isn't only that. . . . I'm not entirely swayed by worldly considerations. Truly I'm not. I think we'd be so *right* together. I like you tremendously; respect your aims. I do like your world and all that it holds, but I wouldn't dream of entering it with any other man. . . . I so . . . nearly love you, Alan, that . . ." She broke off, catching a breath.

"Are you sure you don't love me, Hetty?" There was the radiance of hope in his face, the ring of it suddenly in his voice.

"I love you right up to the very edge of being *in* love with you."

"What are we going to do about it?"

"I don't know."

They looked at each other with almost amusedly helpless eyes.

"Let's go," he suggested; and they went.

"Now what?" he asked when they reached the pavement again.

"Haven't you anything to do?"

"Only what I am doing."

"What are you doing, Alan?"

"Trying to find my way to your heart."

"Still? Even after my terrible confessions?"

"All the more because of them. The courage and honesty of you!"

"But you were hurt."

"The mere fact that you don't care for me all I want you to, hurts."

"Hadn't it occurred to you that the other—you know, all you have to offer—would weigh with me just a bit?"

"Not apart from me."

"Well it doesn't, apart from you. That's what I've been trying to make clear."

"You have made it clear; I believe I really understand. All the same, if you fully cared for me, these things wouldn't count, would they?"

"I think they would. I think I'd be just as glad of them. They'd constitute a sort of over-weight of happiness. I can't help being socially ambitious. And I think you and I would be *right* together."

"Shall we . . . risk that, too, Hetty?"

They turned their heads and looked at each other. His face was flushed, and before she could answer he broke out:

"Question is, can any woman be right with a man she isn't in love with? Oh, my dear, what a muddle our emotions are!"

That turned the question aside, but all the same the suggestion of risking it had been made.

They walked along in silence, scarcely noticing where they were going. By a twisted route that lay at the back of Piccadilly they

emerged into Regent Street; crossed it and by still further twists and turns came out into Shaftesbury Avenue.

"This," he said suddenly, "is rather aimless." But Hetty caught his arm and stopped abruptly.

"Alan, look," she said, in a voice that was scarcely more than a whisper.

"At what?" he asked, puzzled.

"At that." She pointed across the road towards the gilded entrance of a cinema. "See that name, across the front? Well, that's *him*."

Dacres looked again and on a banner of bunting that stretched across the gilded entrance he read:

"Featuring Nickolas Kelly."

"*Who* is it, exactly, Hetty?"

"The man I loved so awfully."

They stood oblivious of everything around them, looking straight ahead.

"Would you hate to go in and have a look at him?" he asked, presently.

"No," she said, drawing a breath. "I'd like to."

"So would I."

They crossed the road.

"Why you?" she asked as they went in.

"Because I think I'm rather jealous of the beast," he answered and turned his attention to ticket-taking. As they went in and fumbled through the darkness for their seats, the screen was publishing the title of the big picture, followed by the names of everyone who'd had a finger in the making of it.

"It's an American picture," whispered Hetty judging by the information on the screen. "He must be over there, then."

"Didn't you know?" asked Dacres.

"No."

They sat down and were settled by the time the picture had fairly started.

Hetty found her heart beating quicker while she impatiently watched the preliminary scenes, and waited for the first appearance of Kelly. When his handsome shadow was thrown on the screen, it was the back of his head that was presented to the audience. The back of his head, as he bent low over the hand of

a large-eyed, bud-mouthed ingenue, with that air of undying devotion which Hetty remembered so clearly. And how she remembered the sleek shine of his gold-touchd hair!

The picture changed; all of the ingenue, except her pretty, manicured hand, was ungallantly cut out, that a "close-up" of Kelly's face, as it was adoringly raised, might now be shown.

And there he was; the lashes half down over his fatal eyes; his fine teeth showing between his parted, well-cut lips; making love on the screen, just as he used to make it in real life. . . .

The beat of her heart went to normal again.

"Handsome devil," said Dacres.

"Isn't he?" agreed Hetty.

"Feel bitter?"

"Not the least."

"What, then?"

"Absolutely nothing. Look at the women all round, though."

Their eyes accustomed to the dimness, they could see the upturned, enraptured faces around them.

"Silly donkeys, I'd like to slap them. Can't they *see* what he is?" she added.

"Could you?" asked Dacres.

Hetty smiled; then sighed.

"Hate him?" he added, quickly, noting the sigh.

"Good heavens, no."

"Well, tell me; I want to know."

"I've told you. Absolutely nothing. He's gone. He doesn't exist. He isn't even worth a laugh."

"Nor a sigh?"

"The sigh was for myself; for the fool I was."

"God, he makes me sick! Seen enough?"

"Quite."

"Let's get out of it, then."

Once more on the pavement, they turned and looked at each other.

"So you're free?" he said.

"Yes. It's fine!" she laughed.

"The shadow's gone?".

"Vanished. Love's gone, hate's gone. I can scarcely take the

trouble to be indifferent. He's such trumpery, poor stuff, that I can't even despise him."

"All right, we'll cut him out."

They walked along side by side.

"What are you going to do with your freedom?" he asked suddenly.

She didn't answer for a moment; then she said slowly:

"Decide for me, Alan."

"What?" he put in sharply.

"You know everything. I've turned my heart and my brain inside out for you; I know no more of myself than you do. . . . Well, then, decide for me."

"Are you asking that seriously, Hetty?"

"Quite."

"Hetty!" he whispered. "How can I? What can I say . . . Hetty!"

"Tell me what I am to do with my freedom," she said.

"Give it to me!" The words broke from him.

"Thinking of everything? Remembering everything that I have told you?"

"Give it to me," he repeated, a touch of stubborn defiance in his voice.

"Then . . . it is yours."

CHAPTER XV

Dacres took Hetty home with him and caught his mother at one of the most tranquil times of her day; the half hour before she delivered herself into the hands of her maid to be dressed for dinner. She was in her boudoir, reading, when Alan went in bringing Hetty with him. Her intuition told her all that he was preparing to tell, and a quick little feeling of pain shot through her.

A high castle of maternal hopes and dreams and ambitions nearly always comes to grief when a son announces to his mother that he is engaged, and Mrs. Dacres was acutely aware of the ruins of her own particular castle around her feet, and all before Alan had uttered a word. However, she extended a friendly hand towards Hetty.

Hetty, quite as fully endowed with intuition, and perhaps, because existence had not been so easy to her, more practised in the use of it, also read a good deal into those fleeting seconds, but since it was only that which she had expected to read, it didn't disconcert her. And she responded to the hand clasp as composedly as Mrs. Dacres herself. Her little apology for the unconventional hour of her call was quite perfectly offered.

"Mother will see that we cannot be ceremonious this evening." said Alan happily. "Mother, Hetty and I are engaged."

Mrs. Dacres expressed the surprise that he expected of her. Women have practised these small deceptions for such immemorial ages that they do them almost mechanically now. But fundamentally she was a sincere woman, and the pleasure that he also so obviously expected was not forthcoming. Could not be, unless she were to sully a very sacred moment with down-right lies. She accepted Hetty very sweetly and courteously, but it was an acceptance merely; nothing more. Alan, in his happiness, did not see that, but Hetty was keenly aware of it. For a moment it stung her to hot resentment. But the sting faded as she re-

membered that this was Alan's mother; besides she always felt at her best and fittest when faced with the necessity of putting up a fight. She'd won out so far; she'd win out all along the line; to the very end!

"Hetty must join us at the theatre this evening, if she has nothing else to do," said Mrs. Dacres presently. "We've a box at the Harlequin. Dine with us first, if you can manage such a rush; will you?"

Hetty agreed, quietly, and Mrs. Dacres rang to arrange for her to be driven home and back again. There was a little further talk until they were told that the car was waiting, then she was taken down to the door by Alan.

Once at home, she dressed quickly, her mind churning with impressions. Alan's happiness, her own triumph, Mrs. Dacres' coldness; the Harlequin! Queer coincidence that; to celebrate the first evening of her engagement at the scene of her programme-selling days!

Within the half hour she was back, in the waiting car; the chauffeur had opened the door, closed it after her, touched his cap and returned to his job. Life was going to be all like that now; easy and comfortable. Things were turning out so wonderfully. All her dreams were coming true. And she had been completely fair to Alan; she had kept nothing back from him; had told him just what she felt for him. He himself had chosen.

Her ships were only waiting to go riding gallantly over the tide of her triumph. . . .

That put a sudden thought of M'sieur Fontaine into her head; on an impulse she called the chauffeur to a halt, and directed him to the hairdressing establishment of the great man.

The hairdressing establishment was closed, but there were lights in the windows of the flat above and Hetty went up.

She was admitted by an elderly French woman servant and shewn into M'sieur's drawing room; a terrible room of lace curtains, palms and Oxford frames, in which M'sieur and his homely wife were sitting reading.

Standing in the doorway, slender and triumphant.

"The ships, Monsieur, do you remember the ships?" she cried to him.

Monsieur looked up in amazement, then waved a jovial hand and remembered.

"Hélas! Poor Helen of Troy, that she should have lived too soon," he answered.

"But there is myself!" laughed Hetty. "Help me to launch *my* ships. Monsieur, they rest upon the very *brink*. . . . Help me to give them the deciding shove . . ."

M'sieur Fontaine rose and stretched out his arms.

"I dress ze 'air? yes?"

"Precisely that. Will you?"

"Will I! For anyone else—no! But for ze little girl wiz ze eyes . . . Of a certainty! And it shall be such a coiffure as never before shall anyone have see! Behold! ——" he struck an attitude. "I am inspire!" And behold, he really must have been; for within fifteen minutes, with his patient wife standing by, he had piled the dusky hair into a cloudy crown upon Hetty's head that seemed to be the very symbol of triumph itself. Beneath it she held her proud head more proudly still; beneath it the starry eyes shone bright and victorious; beneath it, the whiteness of her throat seemed whiter than ever and when she once more flung her black velvet cloak around her, pouffing out the big ruched collar round her shoulders, she felt herself poised upon the very pinnacle of success.

"Alas, indeed, poor Helen of Troy!" she cried looking in the mirror, while M'sieur Fontaine rubbed his deft fat hands together and chuckled, and Madame nodded her head wisely.

"What thanks can one give?" Hetty swung around, looking from one to the other of them.

Monsieur made a deprecating gesture.

"Genius is its own contentment," he said regally. "Go, and triumph!"

Hetty went, first excitedly kissing Madame then Monsieur, upon the cheeks. She whirled down to the car again and was once more on her way to Mrs. Dacres' home.

Whether the cloudy crown that M'sieur Fontaine had set upon her head really set the seal of success upon her cannot be definitely decided, but that evening was certainly an evening of triumphs for Hetty.

Never had she looked lovelier than she did this evening with

the color of excitement in her cheeks; the happy wit of excitement upon her tongue. She was glad, now, that she had to fight, for fighting brought forth whatever qualities of brilliance she possessed. Little by little she battered down Mrs. Dacres' reserve; one by one she saw the elder woman's defences go down before her battery of beauty and charm. Every instinct for refinement, easiness and culture that she had been born with, sprang to her aid now when she found herself not only *in* this atmosphere, but intimately of it. She was one with it; for Alan had made it hers. And Alan's mother had to admit not only that she fitted it, but that she shone in it. Mrs. Dacres became happier.

"Happy?" Alan asked Hetty half way through the evening.

"I am, I *am!*" she answered, in a whisper, and beneath the edge of the box and the cover of the theatre's darkness, his hand found hers.

"I'm going to make you love me. I can. I know I can," his whispered voice went on with the blind confidence of love.

And at that moment, right at the very height of her triumph, she felt that it wouldn't be impossible; and her hand answered his with genuine feeling.

When she reached home, considerably later that evening, she found a letter in her letter-box addressed in a hand she did not recognise; it had been forwarded from the *Home Point of View* office.

Opening it, she was amazed to read:

Dear Miss Carol:

If you still have any advice to spare on the question of running women's papers, come and give it.

Yours truly,
Gregory Wicke.

She laughed, as her mind went back through the years to that evening she had taken Felicity Wicke home to her irate father.

"How the old boy remembers," she said, half aloud, and she sat down then and there and wrote an answer.

It was just another accent upon her triumph that she should write and tell old Wicke, of Wicke's Weeklies, that her advice was no longer available. . . .

And when she had written that note, she wrote another, a longer one, to Ben Jones, telling him of her engagement to Alan Dacres.

The weeks passed, almost as time passes in a dream, for Hetty. Her hours were so full, her triumphs so many and so varied, for she did not remain content merely to have won the Dacres household; she bent her energies to winning the whole Dacres world.

She did not give up her Soho rooms; some instinct of independence made her keep them; or perhaps they stood for too much to be lightly given up; but she left them, temporarily, at the invitation of Mrs. Dacres, and went to stay at the Dacres' house. Mrs. Dacres had no daughters; she found in Hetty, even though she was never, perhaps, wholly reconciled to the girl's origin, a companionship that came surprisingly near to being the companionship of the daughter she had sometimes rather wistfully dreamed of. She took Hetty with her everywhere; introduced her to everyone from the Earl grandfather, downwards. As the fiancée of Alan Dacres, society, with the big S, first inspected her, then accepted her, and finally raved about her. She possessed that happy and valuable knack of making women, as well as men, like her. She was a good deal petted and pampered; flirted with, and made love to, in the cheery, lighthearted way that women, whether they be married, single or betrothed, are made love to in these days, and it wouldn't be true to say that her head remained quite unturned. It didn't. There were moments when the triumph of it all made her almost physically dizzy. But there were also salutary moments when she would say to herself:

"Now, Hetty, keep cool and steady; it's all very flattering and nice, and some of it is genuine; but a whole lot of it *isn't*."

Her engagement to Dacres was the success she had known it would be; it held no regrets and with the assurance of youth whose path through life is suddenly bright with a personal triumph so dazzling that it passes for the light of real happiness, she was certain that life with him *could* hold no regrets.

Returning from a shopping expedition one afternoon, she let herself in and ran upstairs on her way to her room. At the drawing-room she stopped to see whether tea were in progress yet and to her utter astonishment saw Ben Jones sitting by the window.

"Ben!" she cried, and he rose and came towards her. It was so

long since she had seen him that she felt as if he had suddenly materialised out of nothing. . . .

Through her astonishment at seeing him came two very quick impressions: the first that he had changed; the next, that he looked older; much older; more responsible; graver; broader; different altogether; quite disconcertingly different.

"I *am* so glad to see you," she said, as their hands met and parted again. "I didn't even know you were in town."

His greeting of her was curiously unsmiling.

"I had to come up unexpectedly," he said, and she thought his voice had changed, too; it seemed notes deeper.

"Business?" she questioned, getting rid of some small parcels, her handbag and gloves, on to a table.

"Yes; in connection with the Hemel Heath garden-city scheme."

"Oh, are you interested in that? I didn't know. My paper gave it a paragraph in the very last issue I worked for, but I didn't know that your firm had anything to do with it."

She realised suddenly that she was talking rather for the sake of saying something, than that she had any particular interest in what she said.

He didn't look at her as he said:

"Of course, you've given up writing and . . . that sort of thing now?"

She found herself blushing and was rather glad that he wasn't looking at her.

"Oh, yes." Then after a pause: "Aren't you going to congratulate me, Ben? You haven't, you know. You haven't even written."

"I don't see how I can congratulate you until I know what . . . he . . . is like," he answered.

She laughed slightly.

"No, strictly speaking, I suppose you can't. But, at least, you can congratulate *him,* can't you?"

"Yes, I can do that," he said slowly, "and, of course, I do."

There was a pause; then:

"Happy, are you, Hetty?"

"*Tre*-mendously," she answered.

"Then . . . that's all right."

Somehow, words weren't coming easily to either of them; she realised it; wondered about it, and then laughed suddenly.

"Ben, we're *shy* of each other! Has that ever happened before?"

"No," he said, gravely, "I don't think it has." She laughed again, turned away abruptly and said, "I'll ring for tea. Mrs. Dacres is out and I don't suppose Alan will be in either; he isn't often in for tea just now; his chief's working him like a black. Still I hope he will be; I'd like you to meet him."

"I'd like it, too."

Something in his tone, for some reason that she couldn't explain, reminded her of Alan when he had said that he'd like to go in and see Kelly's picture, because "he thought he was rather jealous of the beast." She had a feeling that there was something in the air that she didn't altogether understand.

"Did I tell you when I wrote that I was staying with the Dacres?" she asked.

"No; I called at your old rooms and Madame told me you were here. You didn't tell me."

"But you're not going to be huffed about that, are you?"

"No, not at all huffed."

"Because I've had such a delirious time. If you only *knew* how busy I've been."

"I've seen your photograph in one or two papers, so I guessed."

"Me, with my picture in the papers! Isn't it queer the way things happen, Ben?"

"Well, you've always meant things to happen this way, haven't you?"

"Yes, but all the same, it's queer."

He turned and looked out of the window and only turned back again, when tea was brought in.

During tea she talked trivialities in a nervous way that was quite new between them, but somehow she couldn't get him talking as they used to talk. The conversation simply wouldn't get a real move on. He seemed utterly unable to do anything to help.

Half way through tea, Alan suddenly appeared. She broke off the trivialities in real relief at the interruption.

"Oh, Alan, I'm so glad you've come in," she cried, and, as he advanced into the room:

"You've heard me speak of Ben Jones?" She effected the rest of the introduction with a gesture. Ben Jones and Alan Dacres shook hands, and again Hetty felt the thrill of something that she didn't understand; it came to her as some unintelligible message out of space; nagging at the back of her brain, but never making itself quite clear.

It was as if they were guardedly summing each other up.

They went through the formal preliminaries of making each other's acquaintance in this watchful, curious way, and were then suddenly upon the plane of friendship. Without detecting how they had reached that plane, she realized quite abruptly, and with relief, that they had reached it; that they were friends; it was as if they had prepared to hate each other and then found that they couldn't help liking each other.

Hetty was puzzled. One of the things that surprised her most was that Alan showed so much interest in Ben's work; and another surprise was the quiet and almost reverent enthusiasm with which Ben himself spoke of it; as if his work were, to him, what art is to an artist. She had never been particularly interested in it before, but he certainly made it interesting, now, as he answered Alan's questions, and gave explanations; it became an altogether bigger thing than the mere drawing of plans.

Ben, as he and Alan talked together, was a man Hetty had never met before; a man she had never troubled to know. A *man*, and she had scarcely even yet thought of him as being more than a boy. The conversation was broken up by a telephone message calling Alan back to his chief's house. He prepared to go, unwillingly, and Ben rose, too.

"I want to go round to my rooms to see if there are any letters; I'll walk a little way with you, Ben," said Hetty, and she collected her gloves and handbag again.

They all three went downstairs and out into the street. Alan got into the car that was waiting at the curb for him, and Ben and Hetty walked up the street together.

As the car turned the corner ahead of them Dacres looked out and waved, and Hetty waved back and then turned to Ben.

"Well, what do you think of him?" she asked.

"He's a good chap," he answered.

"Is that all?" she laughed a little.

"What more do you want?"

"Don't you think he's interesting and clever?"

"Yes, I do." After a pause he added: "So life's quite perfect, Hetty?"

"Wonderful! Haven't I got enough to make it?" She looked up at him smiling. At something in his face, its gravity, perhaps, her smile faded and she caught a quick little sigh.

They walked on in silence. She broke it presently by saying:

"I'll take a bus, I think. Which way are you going?"

"Mayn't I come with you?"

"Oh, yes, do. I thought perhaps . . ." But what she thought was not spoken, for the bus she wanted came up and they boarded it.

They scarcely spoke until they were at her door. Then she said:

"Come in for a little while." And he answered:

"Thank you," and they went in together.

But even the familiar atmosphere of the nice, homely room didn't put them wholly at ease. He stood looking out of the window, while she searched the letter-box and found nothing interesting. Suddenly he turned and said:

"When are you going to be married Hetty?"

"Soon, Alan says," she answered.

"Quite soon?"

She nodded.

"He says so."

"He's . . . pretty keen, isn't he?"

"On me, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"Very keen."

"I thought so." He stood looking down at her, till she coloured and turned away.

"And you, Hetty," he broke out suddenly, "are you keen, too?"

The colour dyed her face richly; she wanted to pretend that she didn't understand, but with his eyes on her, she couldn't; and said:

"Yes . . . of course, I am . . ."

"I see."

And Hetty had a queer feeling that he really *did* see; right into her mind, with those grave hazel eyes of his. She moved away restively. Then looked across at him again, a touch of defiance in her bearing.

"Well?" she challenged, and he answered the challenge.

"You don't care for him." There was no doubt in that; it was a statement of fact.

"Yes, I do. Enormously."

"You know what I mean."

She did know; and nodded, adding another challenge.

"Well?"

"I wondered about it, that's all."

After a pause, she said:

"I love him enough; I know I do. As much as I could love anyone. If I give him all that I'm capable of, that's fair, isn't it?"

Her quick, unasked-for self-justification betrayed her own deep-down doubts.

"Is he satisfied?" he asked.

"Didn't he look satisfied?" she countered.

"Not entirely."

"Ben!"

"Not entirely," he repeated, and after a moment: "He looked . . . afraid."

"Afraid? But of what?"

He didn't answer directly; then he said:

"He knows you are not *his;* and he's afraid."

"But I *am* his. I've promised to be."

"A promise doesn't make you his."

"But we'll be married soon. I'll be his by law . . ."

"No law ever framed by man can really give a woman to a man she doesn't love."

"But I *do* love him. He's everything I . . . I admire. *Everything*. We like the same things; think the same; feel the same . . ."

"You know perfectly well what I mean," he said again.

There was a sort of utter inflexibility about him, that broke down her composure badly.

"I thought it all out, I thought most carefully, most completely, and I know I've done the right thing. And anyway, I *do* very nearly love him, in the way you mean. . . . "Ben," she broke out petulantly, "it's perfectly sickening that one shouldn't be able to be in love when one wants to. I was in love with a rotter once. . . . Why shouldn't I be in love with Alan?"

"Just the general cussedness of things, I suppose."

"It isn't Nicko. It isn't any other man. Nicko's *gone;* and there's not the least shadow of anyone else. And yet . . . Oh, well, there it is; nothing's ever complete in this world. You've just got to go for the things that are nearest to being best. Everyone has to. There's nothing else to do. I have, and I'm content. And so is Alan. I didn't deceive him in any single way. I told him everything without making the smallest pretence. And I left the decision with him, whether it was . . . good enough for him. And it was. *He* decided. I didn't. I didn't try to influence him. *He* decided. You can't say that I haven't been fair." She broke off.

"I *do* say it," said Ben without moving.

"That I wasn't fair to him?"

"Yes."

"But I told him, Ben. He knew."

"All the same, it wasn't fair," persisted Ben.

"He decided; I didn't . . ."

"It wasn't fair to ask him to decide such a thing."

"You talk as though I *tricked* him into it!" she broke in hotly.

He paused a moment, then said quietly.

"It very nearly comes to that."

"Ben!"

"No, don't be angry. Look at this thing squarely. This man loves you, doesn't he?"

"Yes."

"The love temptation is the biggest temptation there is. Men have died for it; murdered for it; sold their honour for it; destroyed their souls for it, all through history; and they are doing it still; and they'll go on doing it till the trump of doom," he said.

"Alan isn't like that," she flashed back.

"All men—that *are*—men—are like that. Don't make any mistake about that. The difference is that some men are balanced and some aren't. Some men let their emotions rule them; others take good care to rule their emotions. The emotion is there, though, just the same."

Hetty was angry.

"I tell you, he *chose* it this way," she said, obstinately.

"You can't face a man with the biggest temptation he knows, and expect him to judge clearly," he retorted.

She flushed hotly and stormed a little. Ben waited for her to finish and then said:

"And, Hetty you *didn't* expect him to judge clearly. You didn't *want* him to. You wouldn't have *thought* of leaving the decision to him if you hadn't been perfectly sure that he'd decide the way he did. You *wanted* to marry him, but didn't want to bear the onus of having to decide." That brought her close to him, her eyes fairly blazing.

"Ben, you're insulting," she said.

"I'm only telling you what is true. If the truth is an insult, you shouldn't have let it *be* the truth."

She drew a breath.

"Ben," she said in a curious caught-up voice. "I've never quarrelled seriously with you yet, but I'll quarrel with you now if you don't take that back. All of it. And . . . and quickly too."

She stood looking at him, breathing quickly, her cheeks flushed; and he stood looking back at her, his face set, his lips just a line.

"I can't take it back," he said, at last, in a voice that suggested clenched teeth, "because I mean it. I don't think you did it deliberately, but I believe deep down in your conscience you *knew* . . . I *can't* take it back."

She was utterly astonished; Ben had never quarrelled with her before. She was rather dismayed and at a loss at his unbendingness.

"I thought you were my friend," she said.

"Being your friend, I though I could be honest with you," he answered.

They stood very still, regarding each other; their eyes, not exactly hostile, but, as it were, sending out looks that clashed mid-way.

When the storm really broke, it broke with sweeping fierceness. They quarrelled with the same frankness with which they had always been friends, and left very little that was hurting and bitter unsaid.

He was hurt and unhappy; and she had been through the process of having a truth she was ashamed of, slowly but surely extracted from the very depths of her heart. There are few operations more painful, for this sort of truth is barbed.

At the height of it, she told him to go; and he went. But she hadn't really wanted him to go, and ran to the door and called him back.

And when he obeyed and once more stood before her in the little room, she stormed at him afresh, and demanded again the withdrawal of all he had said. But he only looked at her, his eyes rather desperate, his hands clenched at his side, and shook his head.

"If you don't take it back, I'll never speak to you again, as long as ever I live . . . Never, never, *never*," she cried, unfairly.

"I can't take it back. . . . It's true. I saw it . . . felt it. . . . I could put myself in his place and understand . . ." he stammered out. Then, the words breaking from him: "Because I love you, too. Always have. . . . There's never been a time when I didn't . . . I . . . I think I must have been *born* loving you, Hetty."

That caught her up sharp. . . . She looked at him, her face quivering; temper dead.

"Ben!" she cried, but he was gone.

CHAPTER XVI

HETTY sat down, weakly, staring at the door Ben had slammed behind him, everything he had said blotted out by that declaration of his love.

Ben in love at all was an astonishing idea to her; but Ben in love with herself was sheer revelation. It amazed her so that it was some time before she could think clearly. Then memories of the afternoon went tangling through her mind; scrappily at first, but presently in clear sequence.

The whole afternoon had been one big revelation of Ben. Ben at the Dacres' house; Ben criticising and condemning what she had done; Ben telling her that he loved her. . . . The trend of his arguments and accusations left a dead straight trail across her mind; dead straight and scorching. And at the end of the trail where was she?

Face to face with a big, difficult confession—the confession that he was right, and that her bargain with Alan Dacres was a rather wretched business.

The end of the trail was shame.

She didn't confess it immediately. She gave way to surges of indignation against Ben; but in the end, came to the confession, and made it honestly and felt bowed down with self-contempt.

She was so overcome by her thoughts that the long dusk deepened round her, and she did not notice it.

It was nearly dark when a knock on her door aroused her. She started up, the thought that Ben had returned in her mind. She crossed the room and opened the door.

It was not Ben who looked at her from the dimness of the little landing, but Alan.

"Hetty dear," he cried, a curious mixture of anxiety and relief in his voice. She broke in quickly.

"Come in, Alan."

He entered the room and stood just inside the door, peering

down into her face, as if there were some message to be read there that he was most desperately afraid to read.

"When I got home just now they told me you weren't back, and I wondered what could have kept you," he said.

"Ben kept me," she answered, her voice very subdued and she almost felt the tempest of resentful emotion that sprang within him.

"Wait while I light the lamp . . . I'll . . . I'll tell you about it," she added quickly.

She busied herself with the lamp, her back towards him, then turned quickly and faced him again. Her face, in the light, did nothing to still the anxiety he felt, nor the tumult that Ben's name had aroused.

"You've been crying," he said, abruptly.

"Yes, a little. But I've been thinking much more."

"What have you been thinking about?"

"You and myself, and something Ben said to me." She paused and stood before him, head bent. Then looking up suddenly, she went on:

"I'm awfully ashamed of myself, Alan."

"What for?"

"For what I've done to you."

Dacres' face flushed, his nice eyes clouded angrily.

"What has he been saying to you?" he demanded, with a touch of violence.

"Only what, deep down, I've been saying to myself. Only I wouldn't listen to myself. He made me listen to him. Alan, I oughtn't to have become engaged to you."

"I'm satisfied. We've been happy. Haven't we, Hetty?"

"Yes—in a way. A very nice way, but not the right way."

"Who is he to interfere? We were happy. I'm satisfied. What was it to do with him?"

"Nothing, I suppose. Except that he saw so awfully clearly what was wrong between us."

"Nothing's wrong!" He protested it, hotly.

"Yes, just this: that I don't love you."

"Well, but I've always known. You told me that yourself. We didn't need *him* to tell us that . . ."

"You have always known about me. Did you know about yourself?"

"What about myself?"

"That you are—afraid?"

She saw him wince, and was wrung by pity. She saw the quick, untruthful denial rise to his lips, and die unspoken.

Then he swung round away from her.

"I'm just torn to shreds with fear!" he cried.

She wanted to go to him and put her arms around him and comfort him; anything rather than see him suffer as he was suffering now. But she knew that emotional sympathy would only make things ultimately crueller. Only the truth could help and she knew that it was going to be painful.

"Fear of what, Alan?" she asked.

"Losing you," he answered. "If you don't wholly love me, you might love some other man. That stands to reason; damnable, unalterable reason."

"I never ought to have let you take the risk."

He turned back suddenly and faced her.

"Has Jones said all this to you?"

"Yes."

"Damn him!"

"He saw it all, and seeing it, had to say it."

"He'd no right! No earthly right!" Dacres burst out, then with sudden reaction:

"Yes, he had. The right that my fear of *him* gave him."

She raised startled eyes to his.

"Your fear of him?"

"Oh, well, he cares for you, doesn't he?"

"Yes."

"He's not the only one to be able to see things." He moved moodily round the room, then confronted her again.

"Do you care for him, Hetty?"

"No."

"Then what is it all about? Where are we? What are we going to do?"

"We are going to break. . . ." But he let her go no further. Down on his knees before her, his arms around her, he begged her not to break with him. Pleaded his love for her; his willing-

ness to love more than she did; his contentment with the engagement as it stood. Anything rather than that she should break with him. She looked over his head, not daring to meet his pleading eyes, her heart full of the bitterest self-reproaches.

He was very dear to her, and she had hurt him bitterly. Her hands caught his shoulders and held him for a moment with a quick, almost maternal compassion. Never before had she seen, more truly, the situation between them; his love, and her liking.

"Alan," she said, quietly, holding him at a little distance and looking down into his face. "There are no words to describe the hatefulness of what I've done; no words to tell you how sorry I am, how humbly I beg your pardon. But we must break with each other. We must, dear. There's simply nothing else to do. If you feel fears about me now, what will it be later? Fear on your side and only fondness on mine! If I have already done wrong, don't let me do a wrong as great as that would be. The whole thing has been utterly my fault. Every bit my fault. You've been . . . splendid to me, Alan." Her voice trembled, and a tear she couldn't help, ran down her face and fell on to his shoulder. That brought him stumbling up to his feet.

"Don't cry. For God's sake, don't. There's nothing in the world that's worth it," he said; and that one tear was not followed by others.

They stood, not looking at each other, quite silent for a long time. She had done one of the most difficult things there is to do and was face to face with her own scorn into the bargain; and he was a one-woman man who had just irrevocably lost the one woman.

Beyond the bright circle of her favour, the world was dark for him. There was nothing to be said.

Presently he moved towards the door; stopped half way and said in an altogether changed voice:

"You'll probably not care to come home again. . . . I can explain. Give it a day or two, to . . . to sink in . . ."

She nodded.

"Thank you. . . . I'll stay here. . . ."

"Good-bye, Hetty."

The tone of that good-bye would be her punishment through years.

Once again she knew the feeling of hot resentment against the way things happen; once again she rebelled against life.

"It's awful . . . awful; and deadly unfair!" she cried out aloud. "What sort of justice is it that makes things happen like this? What's the sense of it; the use of it? What's the good of all this eternal *punishing?*"

She raged against it till she felt that her brain was on fire. Went out for a walk and came back again, very late and feeling calmer. Went to bed in the small hours, and lay flat on her back staring up at the ceiling, her brain still weaving in and out among the questions life presented, and beating impotently against its inexorable decrees.

With the early summer dawn, she came to a mental stopping point.

"There aren't punishments; there aren't any such things. There are just causes and results. I do a rotten thing, that's the cause, I suffer for it, that's the result. Alan did a weak thing, and he has to suffer, too. They're like seeds; sow a cause and you reap a result. . . ." She turned her head and looked at the gradually lightening square of sky that shewed pearly grey within the limits of her window frame.

"Yes, but," she argued restlessly, "that's all very well . . . but lots of causes aren't *only* causes; they're results as well. You do a given thing and that causes a given result. But it doesn't stop there. That result becomes the cause of yet more results. It's like the old question of which came first, the acorn or the oak. . . . I wonder if anyone will ever solve it . . . ?" The question came a little drowsily. Re-action was setting in fast.

"Oh, well, here I am, anyway; the thing's done now. I don't suppose either of us will ever quite forget it. If only he didn't have to be so hurt! I suppose his mother will hate me. . . . Or will she be just a little glad? And Bell . . . Oh, Bell, I *have* wanted things to be right for us . . .! Anyway, there it is. . . . You can't undo things. . . . You can only go on. . . . My poor ships!" She laughed tiredly. "Helen of Troy, you're still one up on me . . ."

Thought trailed; her heavy lids closed. Within five minutes she was sleeping the sleep of utter mental and spiritual exhaustion. . . .

It took Hetty some days to realize that she was once again a social nobody; no longer surrounded by the atmosphere of importance which she had breathed as Alan Dacres' fiancée.

She met Mrs. Dacres, of course; had to; and the interview was painful to them both; it couldn't be anything else; but she went through it unflinchingly and unexcusingly, and wrung a respect out of Alan's mother in spite of everything. Her things were sent back to her rooms, and she looked round her and told herself that here she was back again just where she had been. Which, of course, was not true.

Thoughts nagged tiresomely; memories and regrets made her miserable. She had no work to distract her and did not know what to turn to. Her place in the *Home Point of View* office was filled, and even if it hadn't been, going *back* was never in her scheme of things. She saw Bella, and Bella was very upset and disapppointed that the grandson of an earl was not, after all, to be her brother-in-law. Hetty didn't know quite how much bragging Bella had done about it, nor how awkward it was going to be for her, now, to have to climb down. Bella was resentful, reproachful; and Hetty was badly stung.

Nearly a week passed before she thought of Gregory Wicke and remembered his note asking for her "advice."

The memory came to her one day just as she was finishing lunch; was brought to her by the sight of one corner of his note sticking out of a rather untidy letter-rack, and no sooner had she thought of him than she followed the thought with characteristic promptness of action, put on her outdoor things, paying rather particular attention to her appearance, and prepared to go forth in search of the offices of the famous Weeklies.

On opening her door, she nearly collided with Ben, and drew back, disconcerted by the encounter.

"I was just coming to see you," said Ben.

She stood still, facing him, with a touch of the defensive in her bearing. He looked down at her, his face rather set.

"May I come in?" he asked. "I want to . . . speak to you, Hetty." His voice was not quite normal. There was a note in it of some feeling reined in.

She hesitated. Then:

"I was going out," she said, uncertainly.

"I see that; but . . ." he began, when she interrupted

"What do you want to say to me?" she asked abruptly. "Are you going to take back anything you said the other day?"

"No," he answered, the word coming a little painfully. "No, I . . . I *can't* do that, Hetty."

"All right then," she said, unexpectedly. "You can come in."

But he stood for a moment and stared.

"Don't you want me to take it back?" he half stammered.

"I'd hate you if you did." She admitted it, grudgingly. "It would be so wishy-washy of you. You meant it all, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And you mean it still?" There was a challenge in the question, and a little glint of that new look in her eyes that wasn't hostility and yet seemed to make their looks clash. As if she had discovered the steel in his will and it goaded her to try her own upon it. He answered with a nod.

"All right, then stick to it. I don't want anyone to say what they don't mean to oblige me." But the words came coldly, rather as if she could have triumphed to find him willing to retract in order to win her back to the old friendly footing.

Not that there was enmity between them; there wasn't. There was just something new. Their relationship had changed. She had discovered in that last meeting between them, both his willingness to risk her eternal offence rather than give her anything but the truth; and his love for her.

Two new and contrary discoveries that invested him with a courage she had not known him to possess; an unbendingness she had never thought to discover in him; and a tenderness, a passion of feeling, of which she had not thought him capable.

She was tremendously honest with herself; but that did not make it easier to endure that he should have caught her out in her first real dishonesty—her engagement to Dacres—and should have displayed it before her in all its flagrant deceit and foolishness.

From anyone else his indictment of her action might have had far less effect. But she had been used to looking upon him rather as one might look upon a good, solid piece of furniture, a good, solid, and useful piece, that was awfully handy to put things on, and always willing to bear any burdens she chose to impose.

So, without feeling definitely hostile, she did feel that he wasn't what she had always thought him to be. It was, perhaps, caution, the sort of caution you might use with a stranger, rather than hostility that put the coldness into her voice, the clash into her eyes, the distance into her manner. And the eternal feminine, perhaps, which goaded her to try the strength of her will against the strength of his, admitting, even while she did it, that she would hate him if he were so "wishy-washy" as to give in.

In brief, he had become a man in her eyes. And she felt a wholly unreasoning resentment that her preconceived ideas of him should be so entirely upset, just at a time when everything seemed to be in shatters round her. It was the last straw that Ben should not be where she had always found him in her scheme of things.

He came into the room; constraint still in his voice, as he asked:

"You hate me anyway, don't you?"

"No."

But the denial was merely a denial, with no margin of warmth around it.

"I'm going back to Manchester this evening. I wanted to apologise first," he said, looking down at his fingers, fidgeting with his hat.

"What for?" she asked ungraciously.

"I think there were one or two things I said that I might have put differently."

"They'd have meant the same. I don't want you to apologise," she said coldly.

"And I was afraid you might have thought it pretty rotten of me to tell you that I loved you at a moment like that. I thought you might think that it was the reason for my arguments against your engagement to Dacres," he said, in a low voice. "I shouldn't like you to think that, Hetty. Because it . . . wasn't. . . . I can . . . honestly say that." The words stumbled.

"As it happens, I didn't connect the two," she answered.

"That was very . . . generous . . . of you."

"Generous?" she laughed slightly. "Oh, no; I haven't been feeling the least generous towards you; you upset things for me

pretty badly, and while with my brain I can admit that you were . . . justified . . . with my *feeling* . . . I . . . I . . .” She hesitated unable to find the words that would explain.

“What have you been feeling for me, Hetty?” he asked. still not looking at her.

“I don't know. One doesn't always get *fonder* of a person because one's brain has to admit that he is right. Brain and emotion don't always agree, do they?”

There was a sort of bright coldness in her voice that cut him badly; his emotions were too strong, feeling had been too deeply stirred for him to be able to detect that the tone didn't come quite easily to her.

“I broke with Alan,” she added after a moment. “Did you see it in the papers?”

“No. But I was sure you would.”

“Because you told me to?” she countered quickly.

He raised his eyes.

“No. Because, *you'd* see that you had to.”

“Well, I did see it; I do see it.” She flashed out nervily. “Now let the question die, please. I've broken with him, the whole thing's at an end; my affairs have all gone smash. You caught my ships in a storm, Ben, and they've come back to port in a very shabby condition. Shabby, but honourable, and that, no doubt, ought to be the greatest consolation to me.” She laughed unamusedly. “Oh, and very likely it is a consolation. . . . Only I'm not. . . . Oh, I don't know . . .” She broke off and turned away.

He stood still, eyes still raised beneath his brows, fingers still fidgeting his hat, then,

“Hetty, the other question still remains.”

“What other question?” she asked petulantly.

“That I love you.”

She whirled round on him.

“Oh, it isn't a question,” she said, petulant still.

He raised his head sharply at that and his face changed; once again their glances met and clashed.

“Isn't it?” he asked, and if his voice was quiet, it was not perfectly steady.

"No," she answered shortly. "Keep away and get cured."

"Of loving you?"

"Yes."

"Keeping away hasn't cured me so far."

"I'm trying to make it clear to you that you had better set your mind to it."

"Haven't there been times before when I'd better have set my mind to it? Hasn't there been Kelly? Hasn't there been Dacres?"

She became aware suddenly that her heart was beating hot and fast.

"Yes," she said, breathlessly.

"Still I'm not cured, Hetty?" His steady eyes were unmovingly on her face.

A thrill that was almost a thrill of fear shot through her. He was so utterly unlike anything that she had ever thought of him; like a stranger, a tantalisingly familiar stranger.

"I don't know what you are to do, then!" she cried out.

"Is that the best you can say to me?" There was the hint of heartbreak in the low tone.

It touched her, found the very middle of her heart, and brought the sting of tears to her eyes.

But in her present mood of perversity she didn't want to shew him that she was touched; she didn't want to *be* touched. She'd been through so much of the emotional lately that she only wanted peace; to settle down. There comes a point when emotion, too greatly strained, turns to a nervy irritation at any further call upon it.

"What more can I say?" she cried. "I can't love you if I don't." She blinked away the tears angrily.

"No, but you can treat my love seriously. It's as worthy of respect as the love of other men."

The control that he had set upon himself was breaking badly. Pent-up feeling was trembling through; she heard it in the break of his voice; saw it in the tenseness of his mouth, the passion of his eyes, and felt as if she were looking up into a threatening sky, waiting for the bursting of a storm.

"Kelly's love was a question to you, Hetty; so was Dacres." You didn't tell *them* to go and get cured as if you were telling a

little boy to run away and play . . .” He went on, dropping the words slowly and painstakingly as if his lips were not quite flexible.

Before the threat of storm in his usually mild eyes, she fell back a step and said, defensively:

“I was in love with Nicko; I wanted to love Alan . . .”

“You don't want to love me?”

“I couldn't, anyway.”

“Why not? In what way am I less of a man than Dacres? Have I lower ideals? Do I work less faithfully?”

She retreated another step.

“I . . . I don't know!” she stammered.

“You've never taken the trouble to find out,” he retorted. “Dacres, in five minutes, shewed more interest in me than you've ever shewn in five years! What's wrong with me, Hetty, that you can only feel this sort of little boy toleration for me? I've been pretty faithfully your friend, haven't I?”

“Yes . . . We've always been friends . . . Ben. I came to you in . . . in . . .”

“All your troubles!” he broke in. “Have you ever come to me in any of mine? Have you ever bothered to find out whether I *had* any troubles? Needed sympathy? Understanding? I tell you there have been times when I'd have given the soul out of my body just to hear you say one real, understanding word! There have been times when I've loved you so desperately, longed for you so crazily, that I haven't known how to be near you and keep my arms from you. And all the time I've just been good old Ben to you; thick-skinned; humdrum, plodding old Ben; drawing his stupid little plans; letting feeling, emotion, experience, life itself, go by. . .” He stopped speaking and turned away, then swung round again and took a step nearer her.

“I tell you I'm sick of this little-boy attitude of yours towards me . . . I'm tired of being told that I don't know what it is to love, or hate, or have ambitions when all the time I'm a man, doing a man's work, giving all my brain and sincerity to it; and with a man's love burning me all up.”

Beneath the intensity of his voice and the flaming of his eyes, she felt that she, too, was being burnt up. The pent-up feeling

of years had broken loose and was falling scorchingly from his lips.

Each word and look of indifference that she had ever given him, seemed to have stored itself fumingly in his memory to break forth now in a shower of sparks; things she had not noticed and only remembered as he recalled them to her.

A lot that he said was unfair; hopelessly exaggerated, and far too greatly insisted upon; but it was his heart that was speaking not his head, and his heart was very bitter, very hurt, and still very young.

And she was all wrought up from the happenings of the past week, and received his outburst sheer upon her raw, over-strained, tingling nerves. She couldn't counter it in any way.

She just had to let him go on as he chose, until the finish, while she looked on feeling rather as if an earthquake were happening and that things were being shaken sheer to chaos around her.

He finished:

"I've stood by and seen you give everything in you to the stupidest, rottenest sort of philanderer, and *known* all the time that he wasn't any good to anyone . . . But I've kept quiet because it was something *you* were going through, something *you* were suffering . . . I've kept quiet and given just what you wanted from me . . . If you'd been happy with Dacres, and he with you; if you'd even been *honest* with him, I'd have kept quiet still, and wished you well; yes, and *meant* it, too, with all my heart . . . But when you receive what I can offer as if it were a stupid, no-account emotion, to be flapped away with a flippant word, then you get me to snapping point . . . What is it you want, Hetty? Must a man be as handsome as a god to be treated seriously? Or the grandson of an earl? Or what?"

"Ben!" she blazed out, but he was far past listening.

"It just brings me to snapping point," he repeated. "I can't stand any more, I'm finished; through with it . . . I've loved you till loving doesn't seem worth while any more, waited till waiting seems just so much wasted time . . . I'm through with it . . . Finished . . ."

Quite suddenly he jammed on his hat, strode over to the door and went out.

If he had used his fists with the same vehemence that he had used his tongue, she could not have felt more battered and worn out. This was the culminating emotional strain of the whole, long, wearing week . . .

She had never suffered such a complete sense of being at a loss since the evening Mrs. Carol had turned her out of her home. Things had gone down all round her; she had no footing anywhere . . .

"I can't do anything now . . . Can't see anyone . . . arrange any plans . . ." she said to herself and sank into a chair, unable even to cry.

But the need for action presently pulled her together; gathered her scattered faculties; and she sat straight again.

"I must, I *must*," she told herself. "Things have all gone wrong but they *shan't* beat me . . . I planned to go and see old Wicke and I *will* . . . Ben *shan't* knock everything on the head . . ." She was on her feet as she spoke and crossing to her room.

Before the glass, she once more settled her appearance and then started out.

She walked, to steady herself, and walked briskly; so that she was glowing and in a very different frame of mind when she reached the offices of the Wicke Weeklies, and entered the imposing doorway, made her way through a wide hall with doors on each side, pushed open a swing door and let it go behind her. Her self-confidence was her own again when she finally sent up her name to Gregory Wicke.

Gregory Wicke saw her within twenty minutes. His greeting of her was characteristic, but not greatly encouraging. He looked up from his desk and said:

"What do you want to see me for?"

"To find out whether my "advice" is still a marketable commodity," she replied.

"I thought you wrote me that it wasn't for sale?"

"It wasn't then; it is now; if any one wants to buy it."

"Sit down and let's talk it over," said Gregory Wicke.

Hetty sat down and waited.

"I've read your stuff in the *Home Point of View,*" said old Wicke after a moment, his keen eyes very watchfully upon her face. "And it's good. You've got the ideas. What's the greatest thing in the world?"

Before she could attempt an answer, he went on.

"I'll tell you—self-understanding. The greatest commandment of all is one that isn't numbered among the ten." He broke off to point an impressive finger at her.

"Know thyself," he finished.

She nodded, and his impressiveness collapsed into business again.

"Well, there you are. That's the policy of the new paper I'm bringing out. That's its message. Self-revelation. See? That's what it's out for; to help feminine humanity to a real understanding of itself. Good scheme, eh?"

"Excellent. What do you want of me?"

He leaned forward, an elbow on the big desk before him.

"There's one special feature I'm going to keep running through it; and that's a young girl interest. Girls don't know what they're aiming at these days; they don't know what they're cut for, and what's worse, they don't know what they may be *in* for. Women asked for freedom, clamoured for freedom, fought for freedom . . ."

"And were given license," put in Hetty.

Old Wicke nodded.

"Result—chaos," he said. "Now my paper will be a paper for women of all ages, all creeds, and as far as possible, all classes, and one of its aims will be to get at the heart of the modern *girl* . . . To help her through the stormy years . . . You know, the years that start with flapperhood, when she gets to know she's pretty because men tell her so . . ."

His heavy, purplish face had fallen into very thoughtful lines.

"Baby-face," said Hetty to herself.

"When she wants to get out and see things for herself; try things; experiment; and generally cut a few capers," he went on. "Curiosity, that's what it is chiefly." And he sighed.

"Baby-face," said Hetty to herself again. "I wonder how she turned out?" And aloud, seeing that he had stopped speaking:

"Curiosity is all right, . . ." she began.

"If it's aroused about the right things!" he broke in. "Exactly; and I want to help them to be curious about the right things and curious in the right way. I ran a big tirade against the modern girl's inquisitiveness years ago. But that wasn't the way to do it . . . I've learnt something since then . . . I've made friends with a modern girl and I've got to know a little how she works . . ." He paused a moment, then with a change of tone:

"Now you're a girl yourself; your've been on your own; had to stick up for yourself."

"Yes."

"I know, because I've seen you do it . . ." he laughed slightly. "You've worked for your living, and kept your eyes open. That's evident in the articles you've written. You know how girls think and feel because you're thinking and feeling that way yourself. And you can write. Well, I want a page, right out of your heart, each month—from one girl to another. Argue things out with yourself, and spill that argument on to paper; let them see the workings of it. Write about anything and everything; only write as you feel. You aren't out to *teach* 'em anything. You're only out to show how curiosity works in you . . . Which'll be in them too, because you're a girl yourself . . . See?"

"Yes."

"Do it?"

"Yes."

"Right."

They then discussed terms, which Hetty found were to be highly satisfactory.

She expressed her satisfaction.

"There's nothing of the great little philanthropist in business about me," observed Gregory Wicke. "I shall expect you to earn your salary. You'll have to get about and see things . . . I'll send you to the editress of the new paper—*Woman Herself* we're calling it. She'll tell you all about it." He pressed a bell on his desk, and Hetty rose. Old Wicke suddenly held out his hand, and Hetty reached hers out to him quickly, with a touch of emotion, across the desk.

He held the hand a moment and looked up into her face.

"She's married to one of the finest men on earth and happy as a lark," he said abruptly.

And Hetty did not make the mistake of thinking that the information in any way referred to the editress of the new paper.

CHAPTER XVII

In six months time, the success of *Woman Herself* was assured, and Hetty went to security with it, and felt that she had managed to scramble to her feet again and get a grip on existence once more. Old Wicke was pleased to be entirely satisfied with her page, and after a while allowed her to expand the feature until presently it became not only a bigger thing but considerably more varied.

This meant still more work; and it also meant more salary; and above all, it was a job very much after her own heart.

Her salary enabled her to give up her Soho rooms and to move into a small, quite nicely appointed flat off Red Lion Square; it enabled her also to wear good clothes and eat good food.

She had found a niche which fitted her admirably; life seemed to have sorted itself out and shaped up into a positive pattern around her. She was no longer wandering through it; she had become one with it; part of it and its business.

By a supreme touch of luck she found Miss Tarver, editress of *Woman Herself,* to be a woman under whom she could work in perfect comfort. She was not a Gertrude Darcy, but then, Hetty reflected, that could not be expected. The sub-editress, too, was soon a very warm friend. A small, vigorous, twinkly woman, just about at middle-age, she was popularly known as the world's Maiden Aunt. But from the way in which she had nursed Hetty through the first weeks of her new job, Hetty rechristened her the Guardian Angel, and to Hetty that is what she always was. So Hetty was happy in her associates.

If it had not been for Ben, she would have had nothing to worry her. But Ben was a problem that still nagged at her. She could not feel indifferent towards him and his confession of love, because it is well-nigh impossible to feel indifferent to love. The knowledge of a man's love may leave shuddering disgust, ecstatic

happiness, a sense of pity, or of conquest, or any one of a number of things; but it does not leave indifference.

When her first resentment against him had faded, she had found herself thinking that she would like to get to know him; to start all over again with him, not as boy and girl, but as a man and a woman. "Which may be," she had thought further, "only another proof of the theory that women dearly love to be whipped, and generally come back for more. For Ben certainly gave me a thrashing. On a mental plane, of course, but the theory must adapt itself to the march of civilisation . . ."

She had not been able to help a laugh at the idea. But Ben had given her no chance of getting to know him anew; immediately after that last meeting between them, he had returned to Manchester. Then some six weeks later he had written to her.

His letter began with an apology for the violence of that last scene—not for the substance of the scene, she noticed; only for its violence—and went on to tell her in soberly-considered language a little of what it had meant to him. And she had realised afresh that it had meant an awful lot.

But it was the finish of the letter that had caught her attention and held it. It went like this:

> But don't let the memory of anything I said that day worry you at all, because—and I think you will be merciful enough to feel glad of this—I am cured.

Hetty had read that again and again. There was a finality about it which seemed to close the future, as far as they were concerned. He had said nothing of seeing her again; nothing of any friendship still remaining between them.

It had given her the feeling that she'd been hit, and she had found herself saying blankly:

"Well, that's that . . ."

She had answered the letter in a conventional sort of way; with rather stereotyped phrases; and had said petulantly to herself:

"*Bother* love! it spoils everything!" which had brought her to no real conclusion about Ben.

With that letter from Ben and her answer to it, correspondence had, for a while, ceased between them. Then he had written saying that he would be in town and would like to see her, but

she, as it happened, had been obliged to be out of town at the time, and so they had not met.

He did not try to meet her again. Perhaps he half thought that even if her plea, that she had to be away, were not wholly an excuse, at least she was glad to be able to plead it; anyway they didn't meet.

But that incident had started them writing again, and they heard from each other fairly regularly. Cool, almost formal little notes they were, now; exchanging only the most ordinary kind of news. And sometimes she was very conscious of the space that his going had left in her life; and once or twice she still "bothered" love for taking him out of his accustomed place in her friendship. No one else could just fill it.

Her life, though, was too full, too varied, and too interesting to admit any of these considerations at all persistently. The exercise of self-dependence developed her into such a self-reliant young woman, that outside influences had to remain outside.

The secret of secrets lay in work. To keep busy; to keep keen, never to let your interest in the huge adventure of life flag; to be self-dependent; to be equally happy alone, or with crowds; to cultivate your observation so that everything you saw made its special revelation; to keep a healthy curiosity honed to its sharpest, so that you never ceased to explore; to stand clear of the obvious pitfalls and head for the things that are sound and sane and good. And, above all, to do it all yourself. Self-reliance was the touchstone.

Such was her philosophy at the end of the year and a half of steady, interesting work.

She would look round her nice flat, with its nice equipment; at her nice wardrobe stocked with a modest number of nice gowns; at her nice meal table set with nice paraphernalia; at the nice little maid who came in daily to look after her, and sigh contentedly, saying to herself:

"This is mine; all mine; and it's for always . . . I've come through, and can see all light ahead. My way is clear and I'm utterly content."

She was not mean with herself or with her friends, but she was definitely economical, and was saving money steadily. She had Bella to plan for. Bella's education must be carried through;

it must not be allowed to fall short anywhere. Bella had already left the school at Barnes, and gone to one at Hampstead. This was a more fashionable school and more expensive, but Bella had desired it so strongly, that the change had been decided upon. And after this, when school in the ordinary sense was done with, there would be finishing to consider; an academy abroad, perhaps, or a period of travelling. The income from her father's money would scarcely meet this. It was towards this that Hetty must be prepared to help. And Hetty was prepared. For Bella, certain things had got to be done. There was neither question nor qualification about that in her mind.

Her progress pleased her; in two years her salary had been raised to half as much again as the salary she had started with, and she knew that she was worth it, for time had proven that old Wicke had been right when he had said that in business he was no philanthropist. He was not. But he had a sense of values, and knew just how far above rubies were the qualities of loyalty, energy and enthusiasm.

So Hetty was content.

And then one day her contentment was ruffled; tinily, but still ruffled, and by the most unlikely person in the world—Sally Silver.

She had kept up her friendship with Sally by going in from time to time to have lunch or tea at the city teashop where Sally still worked. But the friendship had become rather a mechanical thing, based upon what they had once meant to each other rather than upon any real present companionship. Hetty had not seen her for some time now, and was readier, therefore, to notice the change in her that had been taking place slowly through the years. Hetty was acutely aware that Sally was listless and subdued; the old gaminish buoyancy seemed, to-day, to have disappeared. Sally stood by her table as usual, but their conversation did not run easily.

"Tired, Sal?" she asked at last, and Sally shook her head.

"Not more than usual," she answered. "Only some days seem . . ." She stopped abruptly, as Hetty laid her handbag on the table. Hetty's eyes followed Sally's, and rested on an envelope thrust half into an outside pocket.

She raised her head quickly and looked at Sally keenly.

"From Ben, ain't it?" said Sally abruptly.

"Yes."

"D'you often hear from him?"

"Fairly often."

"See him ever?"

"No . . . not now."

"Still friends, though?"

"Oh yes . . . of course." Hetty said it with a touch of hastiness.

"I wasn't sure." Sally moved away, attended to the wants of another customer, and returned.

Hetty tried to speak of anything but Ben, but saw Sally was not listening and fell silent herself.

Suddenly Sally said in a low voice:

"He loves you, don't he?"

Hetty hesitated, rather taken aback.

She saw Sally's hands close suddenly tight upon the rim of the little tray she was holding.

"Are you going to have him?" Sally asked abruptly.

"No . . . you're quite mistaken . . ." began Hetty, but Sally broke in:

"Some people has all the luck, and don't seem to know it."

The words came so tensely that Hetty looked up in surprise.

"Why, Sal," she said, stammering like a schoolgirl.

Sally lowered her dark head, and a rich colour dyed her face.

"He could always of wiped his boots on me," she said slowly. "But it never was no use. Ben's not my sort and I ain't the kind to be any other sort than what I am." Hetty found herself utterly at a loss for words. Disconcerted by the intimate revelation, she said, stupidly:

"I've got to write to him. My chief wants me to go and investigate the new Garden City up at Hemel Heath. Ben's firm has built most of it, you know. I want Ben to give me an introduction to the actual architect who designed and planned it . . ."

The words trailed, for she realised the utter lack of sympathy that must appear in them to Sally. And she didn't lack sympathy really; she was merely nervous.

She put out a quick hand and covered Sally's.

Sal twisted away.

"Oh, it's all right. No one needn't shed no tears over me. I'm going to marry Jimmy Cliff. Remember Jimmy?"

Hetty nodded.

"He's always bothering me to. So I'm going to. He's a good-hearted fellow in his way and is in a good situation now. It'll be something to be comfortable and looked after. I'm sick of this eternal keeping on." She paused; then: "He's had his girls and they've all been a wash-out one way and another. He's had his fling and wants to settle down. He's always been fond of me . . . And yesterday he says what about it and I says all right."

Another pause; and then:

"If you can't reach high enough to grab a star, you've got to put up with any little glimmer as happens to shine your way. Life's all a beastly swindle, anyway."

There was a considerable silence. Hetty didn't know what to say.

"There's been times when I've pretty nearly hated you, Hetty," she added. "But I was always too fond of you to hate you, if you know what I mean."

"Sal, I'm horribly sorry. Don't go and mess things up, though . . . Second best *is* only second best . . ."

Sally leaned across the table.

"Don't you go and mess things up for *him,* then. Why can't you take him and make him happy?"

"He doesn't want me now, anyway . . ."

"You can *use* him to get introductions out of . . ." Sally caught a sharp breath and drew away. Hetty finished her tea, gathered her bag and gloves and rose.

"Ain't you got a heart, Het?" Sally whispered. "Don't you want a home and . . . and *kids* and . . . things . . .? Ain't you *got* a heart?"

If she could have felt the sudden, quick tumult in Hetty's breast, she would not have needed to ask.

Hetty escaped, leaving the question unanswered.

She went back to her nice little flat; to her trim, efficient maid; to her daintily served dinner; she sat afterwards in her nice living-room; drank her coffee; read until friends dropped in;

sat talking of all sorts of interesting things till nearly midnight, and at the end of it made a big discovery; she was lonely.

Loneliness didn't settle upon Hetty all in one piece, as it were; it very rarely settles upon anyone quite like that. Its symptoms are generally intermittent. Hetty's first realization of loneliness was a shock, but the shock faded with the dawn of the next busy day and the realization was not thrust upon her again with any force, for some time. A chance revelation of feeling in a sister woman had brought it to her, just as such a chance might bring it again. In between the chances, though, lay stretches of everyday life and work. Moods would be something more than moods if there were no in-between times.

But if the mood, struck from Sally's revelation of her secret, was dimmed, the memory of the secret remained, and Hetty thought of it a lot. It was a new light upon Sally; and a new light upon Ben.

She did not, after Sally's comment on the point, write to Ben for an introduction to anyone of importance in his firm who might help her to an inside knowledge of the Garden City at Hemel Heath.

When the "city" was sufficiently in being to be described in the press, she went alone to gather impressions of it, and found a good many journalistic brethren doing the same thing.

The "City" was laid out in a series of charming little squares; houses grouped around plots of newly laid turf, rather after the manner of the courtyards of Hampton Court. The effect was old world peacefulness, combined with spic-and-span newness. The early summer freshness and sunshine gave it all a pristine, gilded look.

One of the squares so caught Hetty's fancy that she stayed for a long time looking over the just completed, empty houses; so in love with what she saw that she had wild ideas of giving up her flat and taking up her abode at Hemel Heath.

"Only," she thought to herself, "it would be extremely difficult to decide which house to take . . . even if one were rich enough."

She was looking round a kitchen, as she thought this, admiring

the sound solid sense of the room, when a pleasant-looking young man came in through the scullery and stopped short on seeing her.

He glanced at the note-book in her hand and said:

"Press?"

She told him that his guess was right.

"Anything I can do? I'm of Trenchard's, the firm who built this square . . ."

After which introduction they went through the rest of the premises together, respectively giving and acquiring knowledge of details; and afterwards into several of the other houses. The pleasant young man was very ready to give her any details she cared to ask for, and they were chatting away quite freely by the time they stopped and stood looking round a particularly attractive Hall in one of the larger houses of the square.

"Now these," said Hetty in her positive way, "are what I call *real* houses. They're so sane. I like this square best of the lot. There's a *little* tendency to "artiness" in some of the others, but these are fine. So dignified and reasonable. And they're *modern;* really modern. Some of the others are just a bit inclined to go for fake old-fashionedness, which I hate . . ."

The pleasant young man rubbed his hands together, with an air of satisfaction.

"This isn't the main square, of course, but between you and me I rather fancy the tail's going to wag the dog this time. Everyone's potty about our square, and every house in it could have been sold twenty times over."

Hetty was silent for a moment; then she said, looking abstractedly out through a wide-open window:

"I know a man who works for your firm. Ben Jones, his name is . . . I suppose you know him?"

"Do I not? This square is his. Trenchard's gets the kudos of it, of course, but Ben Jones planned the houses."

Hetty looked at the pleasant young man a little uncertainly.

"Do you mean he . . . *drew* the plans, or . . . or . . . designed them? *Invented* them? Created them? I don't know what the correct architectural phrase is . . ." She broke off, on a half laugh.

"Yes, that's it," said the young man briskly. "He designed them. You see, in our business . . ."

But Hetty was not listening. She was thinking.

So it was Ben who had designed these perfectly fascinating houses; Ben himself; even though his firm got the credit for them . . . She looked around, a new interest in her eyes, and noted again how satisfying the lines and angles of this hall were; how entirely pleasing the rise of the stairway from it; even the banisters were just right.

"Ah, you're looking at the stairs . . ." The young man's voice reached her from somewhere behind her shoulder. "He's a whale on stairs. Stairs, arches, alcoves, fireplaces, doorways, pillars, galleries . . . A perfect whale on all of 'em . . ."

Again Hetty let him talk while she only half listened. Her memory had gone back to the last scene between herself and Ben.

What was it he had called himself, in an endeavour to express what she had always thought of him? Thick skinned? Humdrum? She looked round the hall again . . . so gracious;so homelike . . . Even without furniture those qualities showed . . . Such a setting for beautiful things; such a background for people . . .

Thick skinned? When he could shew such sensitive perception as was expressed in this, the work of his brain and his imagination? Humdrum? When he could put poetry into the curve of a handrail!

And this square of houses was only a beginning. Just the first important piece of work in a man's career. He had not said that he had been chosen to do it, when they had spoken of the garden city scheme two years ago. Why? Because she had never shewn sufficient interest to invite such revelations? Perhaps . . . Yes, she supposed that was the reason that she was hearing of it now, for the first time, from the amiable young man. . . .

"Every now and then," the young man was saying, when Hetty next awoke to a consciousness of his voice, "every now and then a genuine born-genius at the job comes along; and when he's a perfect fiend for work into the bargain, there's absolutely no stopping him. That's Ben Jones all over. Of course he's leaving us; getting out on his own. But our old man's a real white man that way; he'll never try to tie a feller down; not if he sees the feller's got wings. He had wings himself once and

he knows what it feels like to want to hear 'em flapping. . . ." The young man laughed.

Hetty lost him again there. She was thinking of Ben as a "feller with wings."

"When you've lived pretty nearly next door to anyone . . ." she said suddenly, and stopped.

"Eh?" enquired the young man.

Hetty laughed slightly; she had been thinking aloud rather than speaking to him.

"Oh, I lived more or less next door to Ben Jones once, years ago . . . and I was going to say that when you live next door to a person, you don't think of him ever being . . . anything particular . . ."

"A feller's never a prophet in his own back yard, what? See, tombstones, wasn't it?"

"Yes. And looking back I can see that they were jolly good tombstones too. In fact I can see those tombstones here . . ." And she loked round the hall again.

"Oh, come, I say, what a merry little idea!" he protested.

"You know what I mean . . . The passion of work he always put into them . . . Is he anywhere around?"

The young man shook his head.

"He's down at the country place of one of the new-poor dukes, talking over plans for a residence better suited to the new poverty than the ancestral walls. The Duke of Detmouth it is; you know, the one whose twin girls have gone on the movies . . ."

"Hunting the elusive pin-money," put in Hetty. "Yes, I know. Couldn't help it, could I, with their pictures all over the place?"

"Well, it's him. We're building his new place, and we've given the job to Jones. They'll all be after him now, you'll see. It'll be quite the modish thing to have a Ben Jones house, I assure you." And Hetty answered slowly:

"I believe it will."

After this, she was more than ever occupied by thoughts of Ben; and, afresh, by a sense of her own unfairness towards him. "A feller with wings." She smiled a little as she thought and re-thought of the phrase.

She wished again that she could meet him and, in the light of her new discoveries concerning him, begin at a new beginning to get acquainted. She wished she could go to him and ask him to cut out all that had been, and start a new friendship.

She felt more acutely than she had felt before that she owed him an apology for her blindness, and would very much like to offer it; but it seemed difficult suddenly to write an apology that had been due to him over two years ago, especially when the tone of their correspondence had been so cool and formal.

She let a few days go by and then wrote to him, asking if she might write some little personal sketch of him when she did her write-up of the Hemel Heath Garden City. She told him how much she had liked his houses and wished him a heap of luck.

She sent the letter to Trenchard's in Manchester asking that it should be forwarded if he were still away.

To this she received an answer—in an envelope that wore a little coronet on its flap—written from the poverty-stricken ducal halls that the amiable young man from Trenchard's had spoken of. It ran:

Dear Hetty:

I can't see anything to write about, but if you can get any copy out of me, please make what you like of it.

I'm away on a job now; it will be my last job for Trenchard's. After this, I am setting up on my own. Many thanks for your wishes.

Yours,

Ben.

Hetty put the note down, disappointed in it. It was just the kind of letter that they had been exchanging for the last two years. What a fool she had been not to make her apology at the time of that scene in the little Soho rooms! She could have explained that it had been blindness, rather than wilful unkindness; youthful egotism, rather than ingrained selfishness, that had made her see him as something considerably less than he was.

She woke once more to the fact that she was lonely. "It's ridiculous," she told herself impatiently, "when I have so many friends and am always so busy. I won't be lonely; I will *not* be lonely."

Which was easy to say.

CHAPTER XVIII

At Easter, Sally Silver and Jimmy Cliff were married, and in response to an invitation card elaborately inscribed in silver print, Hetty went to the wedding.

Afterwards, she wished she hadn't. It depressed her profoundly. She wanted to cry nearly all through the ceremony. She could not decide which was the more pathetic—Sally's honest, courageous face, it's courage dwindled to a sort of resignation, beneath a wholly unbecoming wreath of orange blossom and a far too skimpy net veil; or Jimmy Cliff's irresponsible hilarity. His marriage with a girl whose heart had always been another man's seemed to Hetty such a tragic reason for hilarity. Did he know? Or guess? What did such a marriage amount to, anyway?

Sally looked so hopeless in her over-elaborate wedding dress. She never had had any instinct for clothes, and to-day every stitch in the ill-advised white satin was wrong. If she hadn't looked pathetic, she would have looked a sketch.

After the ceremony she had the wedding luncheon to sit through. It was given at the house of the bridegroom's parents and was eaten to the accompaniment of teasing, giggling, and high spirits in general. Only the bride was pale, constrained and subdued.

Later Sal changed from her wedding dress into a painfully new brown costume, and presently she took Hetty into the parlour and shewed her the wedding presents. Hetty blindly admired them all, not really knowing in the least what to say; none of the usual phrases seemed to fit this wedding.

She reached out towards a beaten silver rose bowl, saying:

"That's nice. What a lot of lovely things, Sally. That's awfully nice . . ." But Sally caught her hand and almost snatched the bowl out of her reach.

Hetty stared at her in amazement and Sally's chin quivered and her face flushed hotly.

"You . . . you needn't finger it, Het," she said huskily. "It'll get . . . smudgy. . . ." Yet her own warm hands were freely leaving marks around the edge of the bowl . . .

Hetty felt suddenly that she wanted to turn and run; that she was on the brink of an emotional revelation that she simply couldn't bear. . . .

But Sally didn't indulge in any outburst; she just stood there and said:

"Ben give it me," and tears were running down her face and falling into Ben's bowl; but she wasn't actively sobbing, she was just resignedly letting tears fall.

Hetty found herself with her arms round Sally, bowl and all, and heard her own voice saying in a fierce sort of whisper:

"Be happy . . . D'you hear? Be *happy!*" and she shook Sally, and Sal said.

"Oh, I'm *happy* all right." And just then the bridegroom's voice sounded calling out that the cab had come and they'd got to get a move on. The rest was all the hustle of good-byes and seeing the newly married pair off, and the throwing of rice and confetti; and kissing and giggling and more jokes.

And then Hetty was on her way home again and never so utterly in the blues before. A funeral couldn't have depressed her more.

Sal, who had always been so gay and spirited, to wear that resigned look on that day of all days—her wedding day. Where had the gaiety gone? Where the spirit, the cock-sureness? Something had changed in Sal. Some light had gone out of her eyes; some lilt out of her voice. What was the cause of it?

Nothing, since the scene with her father, when she insisted that he should use his money for the benefit of Bella, had ever so stirred her sense of tragedy, as this wedding to-day.

When Ben had condemned her for being utterly self-interested, he had judged by superficials and particularly by her attitude towards himself. Hetty was self-interested; but for all that, no personal emotion ever seemed so big or so wringing to her as the emotions of others.

This, that she called the sudden "going snap" of Sally, caught

her and wrung her almost beyond endurance. What had done this to Sally? Was it Ben? And how appalling that people could hurt each other; spoil each other; wipe the bloom off life for each other in such a way . . . All unwittingly, too. There was no question of any deliberate purpose in it . . . It was just Fate; just one of the inexplicable agonies of life.

Then, with a sharp twist, the question was suddenly reversed.

Suppose it should happen to *herself?* She drew a quick breath. It might. Why shouldn't it? There seemed to be no reason in these things; they seemed to be worked sheerly by chance. Suppose *she* should ever love where no answering love was? Would she let it beat her, the way it had beaten Sally? So that she had nothing left but resignation? Dull acceptance? She couldn't picture that of herself, and the inability to do so made things seem brighter.

All the same, she'd felt lonely lately. Was that a beginning, a first symptom?

She had thought herself so safe in her independence; so secure in her self-sufficiency . . . How was it that loneliness could touch her . . .?

And right there, her creed of independence failed; her whole philosophy underwent a change, and she found herself thinking:

"There's no such thing as real independence. How could there be, with a society constructed as it is to-day: . . . I'm dependent upon old Wicke for my income; he's dependent upon what I give in return . . . Everyone's dependent upon a whole string of people, and all those people are dependent upon a whole string of other people. . . . Splendid isolation . . . There's no such thing; can't be; oughtn't to be. We're all living too much in each other's pockets for that. Courage? *That's* quite another matter. . . ." Her thoughts were wandering through wide fields, but were nearer to her starting-point, than she imagined . . . "Mutual responsibility. . . . Mutual help. . . . Yes, but most of us can't live bigly and widely enough to do enough helping to count . . ." A thoughtful pause, and back she came to the beginning again.

"I wish I'd helped Ben, though."

The wish carried illumination, and turned its light upon an overlooked spot.

That's where it lay, then—the whole question. Not in trying to do the things that lay beyond your scope, but in doing those that lay within it.

She could have helped Ben . . . and she hadn't helped him . . . She had been too busy establishing that independence of hers.

Loneliness lay that way . . . Loneliness meant having no one near to you towards whom you felt responsibility; no one near to you, upon whom to lavish the impulse to be helpful. . . .

And if the one person to whom, above all others, you wanted to be nearest, felt no answering impulse . . . That was the acutest loneliness of all . . .

Poor Sal! Why should she have had to miss it?

And suppose it should happen to herself?

Could she possibly take the way out that Sal had taken?

Suddenly she shook herself impatiently.

It couldn't happen to her, of course, because she had Bella. If everything else in life should go by her, she would still have Bella. Bella to love; Bella to work for; Bella to give to . . .

"And even for Sal there will be compensations; there always are," she thought.

Yet as she let herself into the flat, she said half aloud:

"But, dash it all, who *wants* compensations?"

When she went into the sitting-room she was amazed to see Bella sitting near the window, a magazine open on her lap. Her hat and coat lay on the head of the couch.

Hetty stopped in the doorway, and Bella looked up quickly and scrambled to her feet. There was something, a touch defensive in her pose as she stood facing Hetty.

Hetty went to her, and kissed her fondly.

"Darling, I'm so glad to see you. . . . But, Bella, it wasn't *this* Saturday we arranged for you to come, was it? Wasn't it next . . .?"

"Yes . . . Only I thought I'd come to-day . . ." answered Bella; and added: "Can't we have tea? I'm starving . . ."

"Why didn't you ask Ann? She'd have seen to you."

"Oh, I don't know . . . I thought I'd better wait for you." Bella turned away and moved round the room restlessly. She looked big and vivid among the sober-coloured furniture; clumsy,

almost, in a brilliant, blossoming sort of way, with her gold curls tied into a bunch at the back of her head; her eyes, so big and blue, her cheeks so bright, and her figure all generous, pretty, plump curves.

Hetty looked at her, a question in her eyes. She thought that probably Bella had come to ask for pocket money. Pocket money had a way of melting out of Bella's purse, and Hetty was always prepared to replenish it.

"Come along," she said. "Let's go out and buy a boxful of cream buns . . . Why, kid, darling, it's lovely to have you . . ."

Hetty left instructions with her nice little maid to have tea ready by the time they came back with the buns, and they went out together.

Hetty could not help noticing that Bella seemed preoccupied; much more silent than usual, and with that touch of defiance shewing in her manner.

All through tea it was the same. Hetty was troubled. She began to think that there was something more serious the matter than lack of pocket money. However, she asked no questions; questions so often had the effect of making Bella opposite and secretive.

She was prepared for a revelation of some sort, but wholly unprepared for the particular revelation that was made when, later on, she said regretfully:

"It's time, darling," and rose from the couch upon which they had been sitting together.

Bella rose, too.

"Time for what?" she asked.

"To go back to school."

Bella swung round abruptly and faced Hetty.

"I'm not going back," she said, and drew a breath.

Hetty looked at her.

"What?" she said, uncertainly.

"I'm not going back," repeated Bella.

"Bell, what do you mean? What have you done?"

"I'm sick of school and I'm not going back. I've . . . Well, I've run away, if you want to know." A toss of the golden head at that, and a defiant pout of the full, red lips.

Hetty stood quite still for a moment; she felt her heart quicken, and drew a breath in an effort to steady herself.

"Tell me what's gone wrong," she said.

"I've had a row with old Mother Denman. I couldn't stick her eternal nagging . . . It's no good looking shocked, Het." Bella's voice rose excitedly. "I've run away, and I'm not going back . . . And you can't make me."

Miss Denman was the school's principal, so Hetty realised that the matter was serious.

"You . . . you can't *mean* that, Bella," she said unsteadily.

"I *do* mean it," declared Bella.

"What had you done to make Miss Denman angry?"

"*I* hadn't done anything," Bella flung away, then flung back again. "Is it *my* fault if some fool of a boy hangs around waiting for me when we go out walking? Is it *my* fault that he's idiot enough to pass me notes in church?" Standing there looking into the pretty, flushed face, Hetty's memory suddenly held a scene of years ago, when Bella had spoken scoffingly of Ben. Hetty had reminded her that Ben was very nice to her, and Bella had said that boys were *always* nice to her . . .

She remembered telling Bella that it sounded horrid; and she remembered vividly just how horrid it had sounded. She found her memory travelling up through the years, stopping at one little point after another.

A look Bella had flung to a bronzed young farm hand at Yatton Abbot when, one morning, they had gone together to fetch milk . . . That little flicker of vanity which had played round her lips at the admiration of strange men who had happened to pass her in the streets and to look their admiration in passing . . .

Why, even now the little flicker was playing round the pretty, sulky lips, as they spoke of the boy who passed along notes to her in church . . .

Could it have been for something of this sort that Bella had been removed from the Yatton Abbot school . . .? Hetty's heart beat harder and her face went hot. The charge against her had only been that she would not keep bounds . . . Again the vision of the handsome farm boy passed before her mind's eye . . . Then, too, she remembered that whereas she had

chattered away about Bella to Miss Belt, Miss Belt had been curiously reserved in return . . .

Things crowded into her mind; things she hadn't remembered noticing, until now. . . .

It was at this moment, really, that she knew that all the plans she had built for Bella had gone smash. She knew, after to-day, that Bella would never be all that she had dreamed. *Could* not be, because she was not fashioned of the right stuff. The knowledge came to her quite suddenly; quite clearly.

"Is it your fault?" she said slowly . . . "I . . . don't know, Bella . . . But I . . . I cant help thinking that it *is* . . . At least a little bit . . ."

"What can I do?" said Bella indignantly. "Can I help being pretty, and all that?" Hetty did not answer that.

"I was ambitious for you, Bell," she said, in a low voice. "I wanted you to have a chance . . . The sort of chance that other girls get . . ."

"You wanted to make a lady of me. Well *that* part of it's been all right, and *I have* been made a lady of . . ." Bella paused a moment, then as Hetty did not speak, added with a touch of defiance. *"Haven't* I?"

Still Hetty did not answer. The look between them held. But Hetty was seeing, not the actual Bella as she stood here flushed and defiant, but the Bella of her dreams and hopes. An exquisite vision of decorous niceness; of irreproachable manner; of dainty clothes; of all the delicate sweetnesses that the word "lady" had always conjured in her mind. And she saw it fade and scatter as she looked; gossamer of mist before breeze . . .

But these alluring superficials had not been the end of Hetty's desire for Bella. There had been a dream of more substance beneath; a dream of something true and real; steadfast, abiding . . . And she saw that scattering, too.

Quite simply she put it into words, for the first time, either to herself, or to Bella:

"Perhaps I didn't so much hope that you'd be a lady. Perhaps it was just that I hoped you'd be . . . a woman . . ." She caught a quick breath. "I don't know, Bella . . . I'm so surprised . . . and oh, kid, darling, so disappointed . . ."

"It's no good being disappointed . . ." flashed in Bella, resentfully. "It's no good hoping things about people and then being sore about it if your hopes don't come off. You've no right to feel that way . . . If I'm pretty and boys see it, it's not my fault. I'm made that way . . . Besides, I like it . . . And I don't see why I shouldn't like it . . ."

"It's all right to like it," said Hetty slowly, "only you . . . you mustn't *wreck* yourself for it . . . You mustn't let it spoil your chances . . . There are other things beside the admiration of . . . of *boys* . . ."

"There may be, but there's nothing that's so nice, or that gives you such a good time," retorted Bella.

Hetty turned away, unable to endure the revelation Bella presented; a revelation not only of the moment, but of years.

Bella's voice, its petulance strengthened suddenly almost to passion, followed her:

"Why couldn't you have left me alone, Het? Why did you have to go and interfere with me? Who ever said I wanted to be educated? I never said it. And I didn't want it! Education's nothing but a mess, anyway." She broke off, and there was silence in the little room. Hetty stood, with her hands clasped tight against her breast, while memory went spinning through the years again, carrying her back to the little parlour in Tag Street, and the night when Mrs. Carol had turned her out; when Bella had, with a few words, so smashed down her defences that Mrs. Carol could have things all her own way . . .

She turned, white-faced, back to Bella.

"I . . . I suppose I've been . . . spoiling your . . . your *fun* again, Bell?" she said, unsteadily, and something in her tone held Bella silent.

Hetty did not sleep much that night. She lay staring up into the dark, trying to think clearly.

She had done the practical things that were necessary. She had telephoned the school and spoken to Miss Denman, who was indignant but understanding; and had arranged for Bella's things to be sent to the flat. She had, by the same means, spoken with Mrs. Robert Shale. She had provided Bella with a bed in the minute spare room and with the necessities of the toilet, and she

had left a note for the milkman asking him to leave half a pint extra, for the morning's coffee . . .

And now she was alone with her thoughts.

"Spoiling her fun . . . spoiling her fun . . . that's what she called it years ago . . . Now it's 'interfering,' but it's all the same . . . And it's smashed everything up now, just as it smashed everything then . . ."

She was sure then that the taste of ashes was harsh upon her palate; and her thoughts were bitter; angry, too, but presently became just unhappy and forlorn.

"Boys . . .; admiration; what can it lead to? And what sort of a time does she call a good time? . . . Where does she get it from? Mother wasn't vain like that . . . Dad, I suppose . . . with his excited jolliness . . . And what did it lead to, in him? Mrs. Carol . . . *That* ought to be a warning, I should think . . . But are people *ever* warned? Dad wasn't. He just found out, too late, what a mess he'd made of things. What would ever warn Bell? I don't know . . . You'd think being asked to leave Yatton Abbot would have been enough, but it wasn't . . .

"If only she wasn't so *fiendishly* pretty . . . Yet, somehow, something seems to have happened to her prettiness . . . It's gone . . . dull . . . blunt; I don't know exactly what it is, but she isn't the same . . ."

A pause, while a new thought found its way into her mind; and then:

"Or is it *I* that have changed?"

Another pause; a long one this time; then round swung thought back to the starting point.

"Spoiling her fun! That's what she said, that night Mrs. Carol turned me out . . ."

For a moment she lived that scene through again so poignantly that she seemed to leave the empty shell of her present self there in bed, and go hurrying with the self of that awful night, through the dark streets of Penbury in search of Ben . . . She seemed to feel again the wintry air upon her face, to know again the relief at seeing Ben in the shadow by the stone-yard gate; at hearing his quiet voice; and to give herself once more to the comfort of his kind, young arms . . .

Her thoughts wove round to the present again, and her heart was heavy with longing. She did not often waste time in longing for things that were past and gone; but to-night she gave herself up to the weakness and felt that there was nothing she would not have given to be able to go back to the first days of her friendship with Ben; to sit again on the upturned box in the shed and talk with him while he chipped at his stones. To see him again as he had been then, tall and coltish in his blue overalls, the glasses over his eyes, the lank brown hair upon his forehead, and a friendly sweetness upon his thoughtful lips . . . To feel again the security that his fidelity had given her; to have the knowledge that if things went wrong she could go to him and he would do his serious, youthful best to help her put them right . . .

To know again the comfort of his boyish arms . . .

She had often missed Ben, and missed him badly; but she had never longed for him as she longed to-night . . . Not for Ben as she had last seen him; a man, as he had said, with a man's love burning him all up; but Ben as she first remembered him. Somehow, it was that serious-eyed, faithful boy, she wanted now . . . But that boy was gone; just as the girl was gone who had run through the dark streets into the haven of his arms . . .

With the sting of tears in her eyes, she took herself severely to task. Such thoughts were maudlin; she had no time for maudlin thoughts. Bella might reproach her for interfering; none the less Bella had come to her, bringing a whole set of new problems with her, and she knew very well who would be called upon to settle them. . . . Distinctly, there was no time to waste in profitless longings. . . .

Bella's problems were by no means easy to solve, for Bella herself did not seem to realise the seriousness of them, or, indeed, even the existence of them.

Hetty let a day or two go by before she tackled the question. Then, one evening, over dinner, she asked Bella what she intended to do.

Bella's answer was fairly hopeless.

"I'm going to have a good time," she said.

"How?" Hetty asked further.

"Oh, I don't know. Just any old how that happens to appeal to me."

Hetty was silent a moment; then:

"And upon . . . *what,* exactly, Bell?"

Bella looked at her across the little table.

"Money, d'you mean?"

Hetty nodded.

"Well, I've got plenty of money, haven't I?"

"You haven't got *any* money."

Bella stared.

"Where's all my money gone to, then?" she asked after a moment.

"*Your* money?"

"My education money. You haven't let old Shale blow it, have you, Het?"

"Mr. Shale has looked after it with perfect fidelity, Bell. But that is Dad's money; not yours."

"Why, dad gave it to me!"

"Dad gave it to your education. It was not a personal gift to *you.*"

"Well, aren't I going to have that money any more then?"

"Not one penny of it, Bell."

"What am I going to live on, then?"

"On a good time, apparently."

"Don't talk rubbish!" flared Bella. "I shall go and see old Shale and . . ."

"I've seen him already."

Bella stormed then, and Hetty let her. This latest escapade of Bell's had revolutionised Hetty's attitude towards her. It was scarcely that she was less fond of the girl; it was just that she was no longer blind to her.

Bella found to her astonishment that Hetty was not to be moved by wheedling, tears, threats, or temper.

The money was restored to Herbert Carol.

"I don't know whether the experiment can be called an utter dead failure, dad," she said to her father when she went to his rooms to tell him what had happened. "But I do know that it hasn't been a success, and that it's finished. Probably I was

utterly wrong in ever trying it, but it seemed the best thing . . ."

"Oh, well, we all makes a mess of things from time to time. Young Bell, she always was a bit of a baggage. Where she gets it from I can't say . . ." answered her father, and broke excitedly into planning what he was going to do now that his whole fortune was his own . . .

"Leave it with Shale, I shall," he decided. "He's a sound man and he's done well with it. . . . Brings in about a hundred and sixty a year, you say? Then there's me own bit bringing in nigh on sixty so that's a round two hundred, and a bit over, without lifting a finger. . . . I don't need to work; all by meself, two hundred's enough. But don't you ever come around me for anything more for that young Bell. I've done all I'm going to do for her, see? Push her out to work. That's what she needs. . . . And that's what she'd have got if I'd had *my* way. . . . All your hifalutin' education ain't any good for her sort. Push her out to work; even if she *has* got a rich father. . . . I don't mind a little bit to *you* now and agen if you find yourself in straits. . . . You's different. But I bar her, absolutely. She's blame well cost me too much."

"That was my fault, dad," said Hetty, surprised at the point of view he took.

"Oh, well, as I says, we all makes a mess of things, sometimes. . . . You did it all for the best, even if it turned out for the worst. . . . And the capital 'asn't been touched, you say, so. . . ."

The rest was a recapitulation of the plans he had already made. Hetty was touched and grateful for the tolerant attitude he took towards herself, but couldn't help wondering how much of it was due to the affection he always had had for her, and how much to the fact of the capital not being touched. . . .

"I'm a pig even to think it," she said to herself as she kissed him good-bye. . . .

CHAPTER XIX

"Pushing" Bella out to work was much more easily talked of than achieved. Bella's nature had no natural affinity with work. She was, besides, resentful of Hetty for not allowing her to spend her father's money; obstinate and wilful; deliberately disobliging. As far as Hetty could discover, eight years of school had left her almost innocent of useful knowledge or accomplishment. She appeared to have passed through the years with complacent indifference towards the question of learning; such knowledge as stuck, without effort on her part, she had retained; the rest she had allowed to go by her. Hetty understood now how it was that her school reports had never risen above indifference.

"Education may be nothing but a mess," Hetty said to her one day, "but *hang* it, Bell, you might have tried to get *something* out of it. Even if it were nothing more showy than the impulse to try."

This was when she was endeavouring to teach Bella to use a typewriter, and Bella wilfully shewed a tendency to play chords. If Hetty hadn't recognised that Bella was perversely behaving her very worst, whatever was left of her hopes must have dissolved into thin air. But she *did* recognise it, and so she persevered and was patient. She was able eventually to get Bella an obscure job in her own office, and able, too, by keeping a vigilant eye upon her, to make her keep it. But Bella resented the restraint; and it was by sheer exercise of will that Hetty was able to keep her in order.

"But," the Guardian Angel warned her in a confidential moment, "you won't be able to keep it up, my dear. The strain's going to tell on you. You feel too much anxiety for that sister of yours. The briefest and most effective way of dealing with her, in my opinion, would be to turn her up and spank her."

Hetty answered with an unconvinced smile.

"Oh, if you don't, something will. That child has a spanking coming to her," said the Guardian Angel, quickly reading the smile.

"Guardy, you are the one bright spot, as far as Belle is concerned. She's cross with me and as perverse as she can be. But she *likes* you. I didn't expect she would, but she does."

"And I like her too. She's a darned little fool and vain as she can hold together, but I'd soon lick her into shape if I had the managing of her." The Guardian Angel tossed her faded little head.

"It's . . . it's been such a . . . *blow*. I've hoped everything and been ready to do anything for the child . . ."

"Too much; that's the trouble."

"Oh, I know. I can see it now. It's my own fault. . . . That's what makes me feel so terribly responsible. . . . I can see how I've always spoilt her, even when I was only a kid myself . . ."

"Twelve years old is too young to be a mother," said the Guardian Angel with crisp kindness.

Hetty nodded, grateful for the understanding little comment.

She was worried. And the worry was beginning to tell on her work. The bogey of being "written-out" began to haunt her. She had moments of feeling an uncanny blankness towards writing; moments when she felt inclined to go to old Wicke and advise him to give her the sack and let her go and knit jumpers for a spell.

If something didn't happen to flick her mind back to action, she felt that there could only be calamity ahead for her . . .

She struggled against the feeling all through autumn and into winter; and then the something happened.

Gregory Wicke sent for her and gave her a big square card.

"Interest you at all?" he asked.

"What is it? A trade show?" she guessed.

"Positively first appearance upon any film of the Ladies Dulcibella and Geraldine Cappett, the Duke of Detmouth's lovely twins, whose debut has been awaited . . . etc., etc. Yes, trade show of *The Quest*," he answered.

"I'd hoped it was something really new," sighed Hetty.

"The Cappett twins are new enough, and there's been so much

mystery about this film, that we've got to be there when the surprise is sprung. Interest in it has been most cleverly worked up; beyond the fact that the Cappett girls are playing in it and that Augustus Hammond is producing it, nothing definite has leaked out. But it's rumoured that the whole thing is being done on an absolutely American scale of lavishness . . . So take a day off and run along and have a look at it, eh?"

He finished persuasively, for he saw that all was not perfectly well with her.

"A day off!" she echoed, with a rueful grimace. "All right; I suppose I must . . ." She glanced down at the card as she rose.

"Lunch, too," she commented.

"Oh, yes; luncheon at the Madrid, afterwards. And get yourself asked down to the studios, some time; out Chelmsford way, they are . . . Said to be the best equipped in this country . . . You're sure to get some fun out of it, so cheer up."

But Hetty didn't feel in the least cheerful. First she was delayed on business in her own office, and started for the trade show in a hurry, and feeling that she looked it. Then her taxi was held up in a traffic block so that when she got into the theatre the lights were already lowered, the first announcements on the screen had been made, she couldn't get a programme, was hastily shoved into a corner seat so that she looked at the screen from an uncomfortable angle, and hadn't had any time to make even mental notes as to who was present.

But presently she found herself forgetting all this in her interest in the film.

The Quest was a "costume" story, set in the time of Elizabeth, and provided excellent parts for the ducal twins, who both looked utterly enchanting and acted surprisingly well. The story was a stirring one; and the photography above reproach. Evidently the production had had a mint of money lavished on it. The costumes were most sumptuous and the settings really beautiful.

All the interior scenes, from the humble living-room of a peasant's cottage to the banquetting hall of an Elizabethan film duke, were a joy to look at.

Looking round, as her eyes grew accustomed to the semi-darkness, for celebrities, and especially for the Ladies Dulcibella

and Geraldine, Hetty found them in a box, but it was a box on the same side of the theatre as herself, so her view was extremely limited, and was moreover impeded by the silhouette of one of the men who was in the box with them; a silhouette that shewed up very clearly now and then against the light of the screen; a sleek head, powerful shoulders, and the half-lost line of cheek and jaw.

"Augustus Hammond, I suppose," she thought. "I don't wonder he can produce so well, with a head like that . . . I wish he'd turn so that I could see what sort of a nose he's got . . ." Her thoughts spun along.

She found, when she returned her attention to the screen, that she'd missed quite a lot of the story, in wishing that she could see that nose. Her restless eyes turned, with a sense of duty, to the screen, but half a moment later were raised again to that silhouette, while at the back of her mind a whisper said:

"It's like . . . It really is extraordinarily like . . ." But she didn't quite finish the thought in words; her heart was beating fast with an excitement she didn't bother to try to explain.

When the lights really did go up, to the accompaniment of thunders of applause, it caught her so absorbed and unaware that she started, with an absurd feeling of having been found out. And now there began all the rustle and jabber of people getting up, putting on hats, pointing out notabilities, clustering forward in an effort to see the celebrated twins, talking and exclaiming nineteen to the dozen.

The box was blotted out from Hetty's view, until she too, rose, and determinedly held her own against the press of the people.

The silhouette, she saw, was standing now, presenting a very well-dressed back to the audience.

"It is . . . it is . . . ." said Hetty to herself and as, at that moment, the silhouette began to turn, she felt that the whole theatre resounded with the excited thumping of her heart.

"It *is* . . ." she said again.

And it was.

The back might be better tailored than she had ever before seen it to be; the hair might be sleeker; the shoulders squarer; the whole outline more forceful, but when he turned and looked down

into the body of the house, the silhouette became just undisguised —Ben Jones.

"I knew it," she said to herself. "I knew it!" and her spirits suddenly fluttered up, and a perfectly crazy impulse seized her to wave a hand and shout exuberantly:

"Hullo Ben!" For the sight of him made her realise how glad she was to see him again.

Now that it had happened, it seemed to be all that she had been wanting. Dear old Ben . . . You can't know a person all your life and see him more or less constantly, and then quite suddenly break with him and not see him for nearly three whole years, without feeling awfully strongly.

Dear old Ben! How prosperous he looked, up there in the seats of the mighty with the hand of lady Geraldine Cappett on his arm. . . .

Hetty noticed the hand with something like a start . . . A friendly little hand, informally gloveless; a clinging, intimate, little hand; with eager childish fingers; caressing, almost . . .

She drew back abruptly and something of her exuberance faded. From the hand on Ben's sleeve, her eyes travelled to the pretty, piquant face close beside Ben's shoulder. It was a face that matched the little hand perfectly; a feminine face, essentially; with wistful, pleading eyes, provocative lips and wilful chin.

"The ivy type," she said to herself. "Always got to have something to *cling* to—a man for preference."

She felt curiously goaded, and tried, by the concentration of her own gaze upon him, to compel him to turn her way, as if it were a fight between that dainty little hand on his sleeve and the power of her own eyes.

If so, victory went to the hand, for Ben did not turn, and Hetty felt suddenly bad-tempered. She gathered her things petulantly and began the struggle for the doors.

One more glance told her that the occupants of the box were also leaving. Hetty decided to get to the foyer and meet Ben face to face there. But several hundreds of other people had decided to make for the foyer too, and she found herself jammed in a solid crowd, out of which she saw no hope of being able to move for some time.

Then the crowd suddenly gave and moved forward and she was

precipitated with it, and reached the foyer just in time to see the famous twins getting into a huge car, followed by some people she didn't recognise—and Ben.

She tried hard to get to the front of the crowd and had just reached the pavement as the car moved off.

She said something rather stronger than "bother." Then she remembered that she had got to write an account of the film debut of the ducal twins and that she'd no programme to guide her memory as to the other actors, and she went back through the thinning crowd, found a programme girl and acquired all she could in the way of the studio "literature" that had been issued for the occasion.

In the taxi on her way to the Madrid, she turned her attention to the study of the programme, and richly illustrated presentation booklet she had managed to get hold of.

The booklet started with three pages of pictures of the twins, with one or two of the producer among them, and went on to portraits of the other players and members of the staff. From the middle of the fifth page Ben's face looked up at her. She looked at it a moment then read the letter press beneath; it told her that the portrait above was of Mr. Ben Jones who had designed and supervised the construction of all the studio scenes.

She read this two or three times and then said to herself:

"That explains it. . . ."

Turning the leaves she found a page devoted to pictures of some of the scenes; a general view of the banqueting hall that she had much admired; a cottage interior; a staircase and some detail photographs of archways; doors; fireplaces, etc. . . . and beneath, the legend that these were some of the scenes designed by Mr. Ben Jones.

"That explains it," she said again, and turned the pages further. The booklet finished with a letter of acknowledgment from the producer to all those who had so loyally helped him in the production of the picture. A tribute to the untiring work of the ladies Dulcibella and Geraldine was followed by another to the work of Mr. Ben Jones.

"I believe"—the producer was good enough to write—"that Mr. Ben Jones brings something entirely new to the problem of the interior architecture of the film drama. That he has brought

something entirely beautiful to the settings of *The Quest,* no one, I think, who sees the film, will deny . . ."

That, and more, Hetty read and re-read and was so absorbed by it that it was with quite a start that she realised that the taxi had stopped outside the Madrid.

Bundling up the papers, she got out and made her way into the crowded foyer.

She did not see Ben again until she reached the private dining room, where the luncheon was to be served. There, at the far end by the top of the very long table, she saw him in a group which included the celebrated twins, Augustus Hammond, a number of people she did not know, and Florence Martineau, a cousin of Alan Dacres.

She had been very friendly with Miss Martineau during her engagement to Alan.

Lady Geraldine was certainly of the ivy type. She had one hand through Ben's arm now, and the other through Augustus Hammond's, and she raised her pretty piquant face first to Ben's then to Hammond's, with an air of dainty coquetry, that made Hetty's lip curl.

She had been wanting so much to see Ben lately, *longing* to see him, and when she did, he didn't so much as know she was there. . . .

Yes, he did though. As if he were suddenly conscious that there was some influence in that crowded room intended especially for him, he turned quickly, and over a medly of hats and heads, their eyes met.

She saw him lower his arm, unconscious that Lady Geraldine's little hand slid unceremoniously from it, and as ridiculously as her bad temper had arisen, so it settled now, and she felt calm again.

She smiled, and nodded, and he pushed through the crowd to her.

"Ben," she said as their hands met. "I'm so surprised to see you here, and so glad, too . . . And what wonders you have been working . . . ! Your scenes were too beautiful . . . Ben, I *do* congratulate you . . ."

Something in his serious face checked her eagerness. He had

been laughing and talking with Lady Geraldine, but his face was almost set now; it was so grave.

"Thanks. Thanks most awfully, Hetty . . . I'm glad you liked it . . ." he said, not quite easily.

"Were you at the trade show?" he finished hastily.

"Yes," said Hetty. "But I got in late and was stuffed away in a corner. I saw you, but couldn't get near you. Huge success wasn't it?"

"Enormous. Are you here for the paper?"

"Yes. You might give me some details of your part in it, will you?"

"Certainly. But later on, if you don't mind . . . Just now . . ." he broke off and glanced round the crowded room restively.

Hetty's gladness at seeing him again fell a little flat . . . He was so changed; so constrained and unsmiling. It was as if a new Ben had frozen over the Ben she knew.

Perhaps it was just that he felt the awkwardness of this first meeting after the scene of their last . . . But she did not think it was only that.

"Have you met the Cappett twins, by the way?" he asked.

"No."

"Neither of them?"

"Neither of them."

"Well, you'd better let me introduce you . . . Wait till after lunch, will you . . . ? There's a crowd coming in now, and . . ."

"Can we sit together for lunch?" she asked abruptly interrupting him.

" 'Fraid not. Arrangements have all been made . . . I'm with the studio party . . ."

"With Lady Geraldine?" she asked, feeling that no power on earth could have prevented the question.

He looked at her a moment, rather queerly; then:

"Well, yes, to be precise," he admitted.

"And why shouldn't you be precise?" she flashed back, conscious of feeling silly.

"No reason," he said. And after a moment:

"I'll try to get you a clear fifteen minutes with them after lunch. That do?"

"Oh, don't bother. I can tackle them on my own," she said off-handedly.

He turned away as Lady Geraldine's voice sounded calling him, saying as he went:

"See you later, then."

She was left feeling that nothing had ever gone so utterly wrong as this re-meeting with Ben . . .

So these were the terms upon which they were to meet! Where was the Ben she knew? The serious-eyed boy she had been longing to see?

At luncheon she sat with a group of journalistic brethren, feeling thoroughly disgruntled. Even her place at the table was wrong.

In all her early dreams of success for herself, there had been a vague picture of dear, devoted Ben looking up at her from his humdrum level with wondering admiration of the dizzy heights she had conquered. Since their last meeting this picture had faded almost to nothing. But even so, she had *never* pictured their relative positions being as they were to-day; Ben at one end of the table, flanked upon one side by Lady Geraldine Cappett and on the other, by Florence Martineau, and herself where she was. She did not grudge Ben his success; her congratulations had been heartfelt, but she was a little dazzled by it, as one is dazzled by anything that isn't quite according to plan.

She had reached that point when she caught the fact that Alan's cousin was looking at her with interest, but, remembering that Florence Martineau was so short-sighted that she couldn't see beyond a yard ahead, Hetty perversely decided to let her stare, and would not make any response.

When she saw Miss Martineau fumbling for her well-known lorgnette, Hetty turned away and engaged in animated conversation with the man on her far side.

Perversity, that was all, and she inwardly admitted it, but her mood seemed to be beyond her control that afternoon.

With the finish of luncheon, speeches were made. First, Augustus Hammond spoke, then Lady Dulcibella, very measured and

queenly, then Lady Geraldine, very frivolous and inconsequent. Then some other people; and then Ben.

And a very nice little speech he made, too; dotted with complimentary references to the noted twins—for each of which little Lady Geraldine blew him a kiss from the tips of her dainty, theatrical little fingers—and most modest as to his own achievements.

The compliments made Hetty rage inwardly.

"If he's going to develope into a regular tame cat, I'm done with him," she declared to herself, a twist of contempt upon her mental features.

And immediately remembered that the question of having "done with him" didn't seem any longer to rest with her.

After lunch she lingered, waiting for the crowd to clear, so that Ben could give her the introduction to the twins. But although the crowd thinned rapidly, the introduction was not forthcoming.

When Lady Dulcibella was adjourning, with an intimate few to the lounge for coffee, Hetty caught Ben's arm, as he was moving towards the door and he swung round and faced her, his hazel eyes enquiring.

"What about introducing me to the twins?" she said, in a quick whisper.

"You said you could manage it for yourself," he replied coolly, and took his arm out of her hand with a movement.

"That's childish!" she said crossly, and turned away from him, angrily. Then:

"Oh, all right," she said indifferently. "Just as you like." And as the party went down to the lounge she turned and joined it.

In the lounge she waited until they were settled either standing or sitting, and then crossed over to Miss Martineau, and said:

"How do you do, Flo? How are you? Awfully jolly to see you again." Her telling voice sounded clearly, and general conversation was jarred for a moment while everyone looked at her.

She was proving to Ben that she could manage this business without his assistance.

Miss Martineau looked up, screwing up her shortsighted eyes and exclaimed:

"Why it *is* Hetty Carol. I thought I saw you at luncheon, but my infernal eyes played tricks . . . How are you, my dear child . . . ? I'm very glad to see you again . . . It's such

ages . . . Wait a moment . . . Dulcibella . . .” She turned and called the star's attention. “Look here, I want to introduce Miss Carol. You'll find each other great fun . . .”

As she spoke she went over to Lady Dulcibella and said something that Hetty couldn't hear. But she could guess that it referred to her engagement to Alan, for Dulcibella said:

“Oh, yes, of course . . . I remember . . .” loud enough for Hetty to catch the words.

A moment later she was being presented to Lady Dulcibella and to the Lady Geraldine; she glanced across at Ben, with triumph in her eyes; and in her heart a conviction that she was behaving like a little fool.

CHAPTER XX

Lady Dulcibella Cappett liked Hetty immensely and when she liked people, it was her habit to monopolise them. She monopolised Hetty, now; Hetty in return, liked Lady Dulcibella very much indeed, but she could not keep her eyes away from Lady Geraldine, who, she decided more definitely than ever, was simply a common little romp. Hetty watched her flirting outrageously with Ben and Augustus Hammond and three or four others beside. How much did it mean? Vanity, that was all; to Geraldine, anyway.

But to Ben? That question hit her suddenly. How much did it mean to Ben? Startled, she watched them, as she talked to Lady Dulcibella. Ben's face was not grave now; he was smiling. He seemed able to talk quite freely with the fluffy empty-headed little fool. Through Dulcibella's slow deep voice, she heard the pretty piping tones:

"I notice," Geraldine was saying, "that Miss Carol calls you Ben, so *I* shall . . . Shall you object, Mr. Jones?"

"By no means," answered Ben readily. "And shall I in return call you just plain Geraldine, without the title?"

"Just *pretty* Geraldine, without the title," she corrected him, and their laughter mingled.

Could Ben be deceived by such trash? thought Hetty disgustedly. Couldn't he see through it all? It seemed almost like an insult that, after having cared for herself, he should descend to caring for this sort of thing.

She came out of her abstraction every now and then to wonder whether she was answering Lady Dulcibella's questions and comments with any sort of intelligence or not; and whether the notes she was busily taking down, made sense, or didn't. . . .

She was sick of the whole scene long before she was able to make her adieux and leave. When she did leave she was con-

scious that Ben was following her to the the foyer, but perversely would not take any notice of him.

Half way to the street doors, he caught her up.

"Taxi?" he asked her.

"Yes, please."

He passed on the order to a page, turned back to her, looked down and said abruptly: "It *was* childish, Hetty. I apologise."

She was so taken aback that she scarcely realised what he was referring to.

Then, almost in the same instant remembered; saw, too, a look in his face that was like the Ben she knew breaking through the Ben she didn't; and that brought the sudden threat of tears stinging to her eyes and pressing on her throat.

"Why, Ben," she began and stopped because her voice was quavering, and he turned away quickly almost as if that quaver in her voice filled him with some sort of fear.

She wanted to say:

"Come along, old Ben, let's talk this thing out," but didn't, because she was at a loss to know what the thing was . . .

Besides, when she saw his face again, there was nothing there that she understood . . .

They moved towards the doors as the taxi drew up . . .

When she was in the taxi, she looked out of the window.

"Oh Ben," she called, "you haven't given me any details of *your* life's history . . . You said you would . . ."

From the pavement he answered hurriedly:

"I'll write . . . Good-bye Hetty . . ."

As the taxi moved off, she sat back saying:

"*Bother* letters!" And the sting of tears was sharper than ever in her eyes.

The day had left a trail of questions, and she could feel the beginnings of a headache; the beginning, also, of something that was curiously akin to heartache.

It was loneliness again.

She worked up her notes on the film and the Cappett twins with great care, but found it surprisingly difficult to keep downright bitterness out of her pen in writing of Lady Geraldine. Then

three days went by, and she did not receive the details from Ben that he had promised her.

"He might have remembered," she thought, unhappily; and it cut her with extraordinary sharpness that he should have forgotten . . .

"I suppose he's lost his head over Lady Geraldine," her thoughts went on. "Oh well, if he means to add himself to the list of the world's fools, I don't see how I can help it . . ."

But Ben had not forgotten. On the fourth day just before tea, he presented himself at the flat.

She had left the office after lunch, bringing some work with her to do at home, and was sitting before the fire, writing in a pad on her knee, when Ann shewed him in.

He had left his hat and coat in the hall, and was carrying a long brown-paper covered roll in one hand.

She sat still for a moment, taken by surprise, regarding him. He *had* changed within the last few years; and especially since she had last seen him. The hazel eyes were honest and steady as ever; but something of the sweetness of his mouth had given way to strength. A new forcefulness, too, was in the set of his jaw.

He was a successful man, she reflected, and he carried his success well. But it certainly had changed him. The change seemed symbolised by the slickness of his brown hair. As she stretched out a hand to greet him, she was conscious of a ridiculous wish to see his hair rumpled and falling lankly over his forehead, as she remembered it . . .

Aloud she was saying:

"I was beginning to think you'd forgotten . . ."

And he, taking her hand, was answering:

"Oh no, but I thought you might care to see some of the plans of the scenery . . . So I brought them along."

"For reproduction, Ben?"

"If you wish."

"That *is* good of you. Have you got them there?"

He put the long roll on the table.

"Yes. I thought that I could make them clearer to you if I called, than if I wrote." He was rather careful to explain that, she thought.

"I'm sure you can. Besides, it's awfully jolly to see you again.

. . . Like this . . . D'you remember our old teas together, Ben? I meant to ask you to come the other day at the luncheon. . . . Only I seemed to get so . . . little chance . . ."

She realised that she was talking fast and disconnectedly, and broke off.

He said, slowly and quite conventionally:

"Yes, it's like . . . old times, isn't it?"

That formal tone from him had the power to hurt, surprisingly. Over tea, Ben gave her the story of his connection with the film business; how the building of a house for the Duke of Detmouth had led to his being asked to do the architecture for the picture, but he made the story so strictly business-like, that it seemed to have no personal reference at all.

"They appear to think a great deal of you," she said as she scribbled down what he had told her, her thoughts going again to Lady Geraldine.

"The duke happens to be more interested in architecture than in anything else. It's his special hobby; so he went into the planning of his house with me very minutely, and I saw a lot of him."

"It was he, I suppose, who suggested your doing the film scenes?"

Ben nodded.

"Then you got to know the girls?"

"Yes."

She was silent a moment, scribbling some fantastic little faces in the corner of her writing pad.

"*They* appear to like you a good deal," she said presently.

"I think they do."

"Especially . . ." she began but finished hurriedly: "I think they do, too."

After another moment's silence she said with a touch of business-like briskness:

"What about your usual work?"

And that led to fresh channels.

It appeared that he was very busy. As the pleasant young man from Trenchard's had prophesied, a Ben Jones house was becoming quite the modish thing to have.

He told her that he was building a house for himself, and

warmed a little to the description of the studio he had designed, with windows that allowed you to look across fields to pine-covered hills . . . But the touch of warmth cooled again quickly, and left them formal and stilted.

She found herself using quite an "interviewer's" tone, which with him seemed unutterably stupid. But his manner, so restrained and unsmiling, evoked it.

She tried to break through it by observing that he must be making crates of money, but when he diffidently said that he was comfortable she apologised quickly and added:

"I didn't mean to . . . pry."

He raised his eyes to hers.

"I haven't suggested that, Hetty," he said.

There was a silence. **Then:**

"Comfortable . . ." she said slowly. "And . . . happy too, Ben?"

His eyes were quickly averted.

"Happy? Oh, yes . . . The right kind of work is the chief ingredient of happiness, isn't it?"

"There are . . . others."

"But I suppose no one must expect to have them all . . . Theres always something that's . . . out of reach . . ."

She felt an almost unconquerable impulse to ask, point blank, whether it were Lady Geraldine he meant. But didn't. He had become so curiously distant. Strange, and yet familiar. It was tantalising, and she did not know how to deal with it. Was it because he had once loved her? Or because he now loved someone else? The image of Lady Geraldine obtruded again.

Without looking at her he said:

"And you, Hetty? Are you happy?" A glimpse of the Ben she knew, in that, but so slightly, so almost cautiously, revealed, that again she scarcely knew whether she had seen it or not.

"Yes," she answered, "I'm mostly happy."

"You've done most awfully well," he went on. "I think it's wonderful . . ."

He still didn't look at her, which left the words rather lacking in cordiality. The thought that he was forcing himself to say agreeable things stung her badly.

"You needn't feel yourself obliged to make pretty speeches, Ben," she said with a touch of sharpness.

He looked up at that, his face flushing. "I'm not making speeches," he answered hotly.

His voice seemed to hang in the silence that followed.

"Don't quarrel with me," she said after a moment, her voice low. "We . . . have quarrelled . . . enough . . ."

He made no answer; the silence, this time, held her voice. She endured it as long as she could, then rose abruptly, gathered the tea things into the tray and carried them out of the room.

He was standing, when she came back, looking down into the fire.

"Let's look at the plans," she said, briskly.

With the plans spread out upon the table and the explanations they necessitated, something of his restraint melted. He was on sure, impersonal ground here. . . . He bent over the table from one side, concerned only to make his explanations as lucid as possible. She, from the other, concerned chiefly in understanding as readily as might be. And so, holding the paper down flat between them, they were at ease. Until he bent a shade lower to emphasise with a pointing finger some detail, and she found herself looking, not at the plan, but at his smooth, polished hair. It was absurd, she knew, but it seemed to her, to stand for everything that was changed in him. She did wish it would fall over his forehead, as she remembered it . . .

She never could explain just what the impulse was that made her stretch out a quick hand and rumple it forward so that when he started up crying:

"Hetty!" in utter amazement, the familiar big, lank lock was curved once more above his eyebrow.

She had straightened, too, and stood answering the amazement in his eyes, with tremulous, half-laughing defiance.

"I can't help it, Ben," she said, shakily. "Your hair looked so dreadfully slick and shiny . . . And it changes you so . . . I want to see you as you used to be . . ."

She caught a quick breath, and went on rapidly, the words tumbling from her lips . . .

"I want the friendship that used to be between us . . . I've missed it terribly; I've missed *you,* Ben . . ."

He stood for a long time quite still and silent, his eyes lowered now to the plans, but not seeing them.

"You could have had my friendship, if . . ." he broke off.

"I know . . . I know," she interjected. "And I'm sorry. I've wanted to apologise to you for a long time . . ."

"For what?"

"For treating you—casually, all those years. . . For . . . seeming uninterested in you . . . For all that you rounded on me so, two years ago." She finished with a shaky smile.

"Does apologising alter it? You were *not* interested . . ."

"I was too confused with my own problems to have time to listen."

"Same thing."

"No. It isn't. Be fair, Ben."

After a pause, he said:

"No, perhaps it isn't; quite . . ."

She went on quickly.

"I can see my own selfishness, and I'm terribly sorry for it. There's *nothing* I regret as I regret that, when you wanted it, I could have given some little help, and didn't. That is one of the most hurting thoughts to carry around, Ben. One of the most stinging self-reproaches. One can't go back and put it right . . . But there *is* such a thing as . . . as generosity . . . And I thought . . . I hoped . . ." She faltered and he turned away sharply, and moved over to the hearth again. She looked after him.

"Ben, I said just now that I was happy . . . Well, I am . . . But I'm sometimes . . . lonely too. Haven't you known what it is to be lonely?"

With his back to her, he said:

"Yes," and added: "But is it ever any good trying to resurrect a friendship?"

"It would be . . . if we . . . wanted it . . . enough . . ." she stammered out.

He wheeled round suddenly.

"And . . . *do* we . . . Hetty?" he asked.

She nodded because she could not speak.

"Then shall we try?" he said.

Through swimming eyes, she saw that he was smiling.

The sweetness was back upon his lips. He was, again, the boy she knew. She put out her hand and started towards him. Stopped abruptly, halted by a moment of revelation that pierced its message sheer through the heart and brain and soul of her . . .

He was again the boy she knew; but in that flashing instant he became that which was immeasurably more: the man she loved . . .

After he was gone, she tried to remember what she had said and couldn't. She could only remember his smile, the warm clasp of his hand around hers as he had said goodbye, and the terrific fact of her love for him.

CHAPTER XXI

HETTY had thought that now she would be seeing a lot of Ben; but she didn't. It was three weeks later that she next heard of him. Meantime she had gone through the whole gamut of hopes and fears.

The discovery of her love for him had shed its customary radiance, but when the days passed and she heard nothing from him, the radiance was a good deal dimmed. He had expressed his willingness to be friends, but this did not appear to her to be friendly. She probed for the reason of his silence. There was no certainty, though. She could only guess.

When one evening her telephone bell summoned her, she flew to attend to it with Ben in her mind and a riot in her heart. But it was the slow, drawling voice of Lady Dulcibella that came through to her.

"Good evening," said Dulcibella, "I've just discovered that you haven't had a personal invitation to the studio dance to-morrow evening. It's a rag to inaugurate the new picture we start making next month . . ."

"The office has had a press card," said Hetty.

"But I specially told my secretary that you were to have a personal card."

"That was very kind of you."

"I particularly want you to come. Will you forgive the short notice and come along?"

Hetty hesitated.

"Will you tell me why you so particularly want me to be there?" she asked, curiously.

"Yes. I want you to take Ben Jones off my hands."

Hetty nearly dropped the receiver.

"Oh!" she managed to gasp, questioningly.

"He's been out of town for a fortnight and before he went my mercurial twin made him promise to come to the dance, and

she in turn swore that she'd devote herself to him entirely, for the whole evening. Unluckily, some misguided friend has meantime introduced an absolutely god-like young man to her, and she appears to have forgotten the existence of poor Ben Jones. Do come and console him."

"But if he is such a very poor Ben Jones . . . shall I be *able* to console him?" asked Hetty quickly.

She hoped that the question sounded more casual at Lady Dulcibella's end of the phone than it did at hers.

"I'm afraid he may be rather desolated . . . Geraldine has certainly led him a dance. She doesn't mean anything; she just can't help it. She doesn't carry enough mental ballast."

"Is that your opinion of your sister?"

"Oh, I'm devoted to Gerry. I couldn't exist without her. But I recognise that if she has a brain she successfully conceals the disgraceful fact."

"And you think Ben Jones has . . . fallen for it?" Hetty thought that the thumping of her heart must be sounding in Lady Dulcibella's ear.

"Well, you know what men are. Such *ready* victims. Especially those sincere, single-purposed men like Mr. Jones . . . Bring your sister; between you you may be able to cheer him."

This was confirmation of Hetty's darkest dreads. The room seemed to spin round her as she stood there, trying to force herself to say something cool and polite and unfeeling.

Lady Dulcibella went on:

"He's coming back to town to-morrow, on purpose to be at the dance, and I know Gerry won't show up. She'll be sitting out in the projecting room the whole evening with her new slave. He's ten times handsomer and more dashing than Ben Jones."

"All right. I'll be there."

"A ton of thanks. May I call for you in the car?"

Hetty said, with many thanks, that she might, and put the receiver down sharply as if she were not going to risk hearing anything more.

It had happened to her, as it had happened to Sally . . . She loved where no answering love was . . . The same man, too. For years she could have had his love, and didn't want it; now she wanted it, and couldn't have it. . . .

Lady Dulcibella was only too likely to know what she was talking about . . .

Shortly before eight on the following evening, Hetty heard the arrival of a car in the street outside, and called to Bella, who was putting the final touches to her dressing, to hurry. Bella, radiant in delphinium blue ninon, her curls gathered up on her head with a bandeau of gold and blue, flurried out of her room, flinging on a cloak as she moved. Together they went to the door, expecting a chauffeur to tell them that Lady Dulcibella had called.

Instead, Ben Jones came running upstairs.

Hetty stopped short on seeing him.

"Oh, I didn't expect you," she said as they shook hands.

He said something conventional, turned to Bella and led the way down again.

At the curb stood a little spick and span fourseater, and Bella hopped into the back saying, laughingly:

"You'll have to sit in front, Het, with Ben. You'll only go and crush me all up if you come crowding in here . . ." And she spread her pretty cloak out at each side of her . . .

Hetty got in beside Ben and they started.

"I thought Lady Dulcibella . . ." began Hetty, when he broke in to explain:

"Such a crowd drifted in after dinner, that there was no room in her big car. So I suggested that she should lend me this one, and I'd fetch you . . ."

"You suggested it?" She hadn't really meant to ask it.

He took his attention off driving to give her a sidelong look. A quick, searching, questioning look.

"It wouldn't have been very friendly—of me not to, would it?" he said.

"Was it very friendly to leave me three weeks without a word?" she cried; and again, she hadn't meant to ask it.

The question in his eyes became acuter.

"I've been pretty busy," was all he said, and he turned his attention to the car again.

"Did you have dinner with the Cappetts?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Oh, then you've seen Lady Geraldine, I suppose?" She made it creditably casual.

"No, she wasn't there," he answered briefly.

How much did he feel it that Lady Geraldine hadn't been there? Hetty tormented herself with the question. Then she leaned a shade forward and looked back into his face.

She wasn't anxious to see signs in him of dejection, and yet her jealous eyes couldn't help seeking for them, and they found what they sought; a little touch of tiredness in his eyes; the least hint of dispiritedness round his lips.

She felt that jealousy was just raging through her, rending her as it went.

"If trying to be friends with me is going to cost you any very mighty effort, Ben, I'll let you off the bargain," she said at last, and felt stupid and schoolgirlish even as she said it.

He didn't look at her this time as he answered:

"Being friends with you has always . . . cost something . . . Hetty."

She leaned back again, jealousy suddenly lulled, swift, excited happiness springing.

For the rest of the drive, they scarcely spoke again.

It was an evening of tortuous restlessness for Hetty. She plagued herself with questions to which she could find no answer. Happy for one word or look; wretched for another.

"I'm like the Alice to that other Ben, which his surname was Bolt," she told herself with a rueful grimace. "I haven't *quite* trembled with fear at his frown yet, but if I go on at this rate . . . And I always thought her *such* a soft, too. . . ."

The thing that troubled her most was, every now and then, that unguarded look of dejection, disappointment, she didn't quite know what—in his eyes. A look that always brought Geraldine to her mind.

Ben had found two or three unattached young men, who were delighted at the prospect of giving Bella all the dancing she could want, and having seen her safely to the main studio, which, for this evening, was a ball-room, he turned his attention to Hetty.

"Aren't you going to dance, Ben?" she asked him.

"I can't," he confessed.

"Oh, I quite expected that dancing would be one of your new accomplishments."

"Sorry. I suppose you *do* want to dance?"

"No. I hate dancing with strangers."

"Then what's to prevent us being perfectly happy?"

She glanced up at him quickly.

"Nothing," she said, breathlessly. "Nothing."

Instead of dancing they explored the studio buildings; he shewed her all he could and for half an hour they were interested and impersonal. Back again at the studio doorway, Hetty caught sight of Bella having the time of her life dancing with four men in quick succession, so many turns with each. Brilliant with exercise and excitement, she was quite the brightest and most noticeable thing in the huge room. The number of her following was being added to, each moment. There were presently seven men capering in her wake, light-heartedly scrambling to be next. And she passed from one pair of arms to the next, happy and uncaring as a butterfly.

Hetty frowned a little.

The gaiety, music, chatter and laughter, all seemed to have a contrary effect upon Ben, too. Glancing up at him, she saw that look in his eyes again, and wondered whether it was there because in all that crowd Lady Geraldine was not to be seen.

But now her starry eyes suddenly lost their jealousy, and saw only that he was hurt. No matter what the cause, he was hurt, and love went to something deeper in her heart with the impulse just to comfort that look away.

"Ben," she said softly. "What's wrong? Couldn't you tell me?"

He turned to her abruptly.

"Am I shewing it? I didn't mean to," he said sharply. "I've had rather a rotten . . . disappointment. But I didn't mean to inflict it on anyone . . ."

"It isn't . . . I mean, you're not inflicting anything. I just can't help seeing and . . . being sorry . . . and I believe I . . . understand," she finished in a whisper.

"Old Pettigrew, the new-rich pickle man, has bought up some

of the loveliest acres in all Buckinghamshire, and he'd suggested my doing him a country seat; I had the deuce of a swot getting out some sort of idea for him, and he liked it and practically commissioned me . . . And then turned me down in favour of Sir William Stabb, because he liked the name, the title . . . I only heard this morning, and I'm still feeling a bit raw."

She felt like singing and crying at once. Singing because that disappointed look in his eyes was not there on Geraldine's account; crying because he'd been disappointed. . . .

Suddenly the question changed.

"Once," he was saying slowly, "I might have brought my heart to you on a dish, and announced its presence with a blare of trumpets, and you wouldn't have seen it . . . What makes you see now?"

"Perception . . . sympathy . . . interest . . . Oh, a lot of things, Ben," she stammered.

"Are you trying to be interested in me because I once accused you of *not* being interested?"

"No."

"Are you trying to be friends with me because I once accused you of . . . not knowing . . . what real friendship meant?"

She broke in: "I'm not trying anything; because I don't have to try. I'm interested in every single thing that concerns you."

He stretched out a hand towards her; and dropped it again, as someone came into the corridor from a door halfway down. Following the direction of Ben's eyes, Hetty turned and saw that the someone was Lady Geraldine.

Lady Geraldine smiled, waved a hand to Hetty, blew a kiss to Ben, and turned to the man who was following her through the doorway.

Hetty caught a breath, and stood staring. For the man who joined Geraldine was Nickolas Kelly.

"The god-like creature . . ." she thought to herself and laughed suddenly.

Kelly didn't see Hetty; he went along the corridor by Geraldine's side with the air of devotion that Hetty remembered so well; and after a moment Hetty turned.

"Ben, don't you know . . ." she began quickly, then went

off at a tangent, because suddenly she felt she must be certain; she couldn't stand doubt any longer.

"Ben, are you in love with Lady Geraldine?"

He stared down at her, colouring to his hair. Then he said quietly:

"Why do you want to know?"

His quietness dashed her; her heart was beating painfully.

"Oh . . . well . . . I don't just see how you can let her make a fool of herself over a man like that . . ."

"If it wasn't that man, it would be some other."

"D'you mean you don't know who he is?" she asked with sudden force.

"No, who is he?"

"Nickolas Kelly."

"Kelly!" he cried. "The man *you* . . ."

She nodded. His face changed.

"*Is* it, by jove!" he said. "*Is* it!" And his jaw set.

She watched him, all in doubt again . . .

"Hetty," he was beginning, when with a swirl of her blue chiffons, Bella danced out of the crowd, saying:

"Oh Het, come and do a repair job; my darling frock got caught on a diamond cuff link, and it's in ribbons all down the back. . . ."

Hetty had to go with her question still unanswered. In the dressing-room she borrowed needle and thread from the maid who was in charge, and sewed up Bella's frock, while Bella hopped up and down and implored her to be quick.

"It's a lovely dance, and I've got seven partners, Het! And some girls haven't any. Oh, *hurry* up . . . *do*. . . . That'll do, surely . . . I don't care if it *does* come undone again. . . . it can come *off* if it likes . . . I've a sweet petticoat on . . . haven't I?" She laughed again, and as Hetty snapped off the thread, she darted to the dressing-table, touched up her hair, powdered, and darted away for the door . . .

Hetty caught her arm.

"Bella, steady on. Don't get *quite* drunk with excitement," she said.

"If this is being drunk, then all I can say is that being drunk's *fine*. Oh don't be such an old stick . . . You're not jealous, are

you, Het?" and laughing again, she ran out of the room and down the corridor.

Hetty let her go, and lingered to glance at herself in a mirror before going to join Ben again.

Rounding a corner in the corridor she pulled up short; just ahead of her, leaning against the wall, waiting, and alone, was Kelly.

How memory surged up at the sight of him! His face—she could just see the half-lost line of his profile—was a shade fuller; so was his figure; but his long, shadowy lashes still languorously fringed his eyes; and the golden lights still shone in his smooth hair.

If Geraldine really were making Ben suffer, it was for Nickolas Kelly, of all men in the world . . . The thought cut through her mind . . . She moved quietly along until she was close to him.

"Well, Nicko?" she said.

He looked up as though something had hit him and stood staring. Then he said:

"Damn," with force and feeling.

She laughed slightly.

He made an effort for composure and failed.

"You're the one person in this forsaken country that I've been praying to God I'd never meet again!" he broke out.

"Oh! Why?"

Again he made a try for easiness, and again failed. It was always as a desperate measure that he took refuge in the sheer truth.

"I've always had a feeling," he said slowly, his handsome face sullen, "that you'd bob up some time to mess things up for me."

"I wonder why you have felt that. I feel no personal vindictiveness, you know."

"I suppose it's because you're the only woman who's ever had the power to upset *me*."

"Do your plans include Lady Geraldine?" she asked abruptly. "Are you free to marry? Or what's your game?"

"Yes, I am."

"Your wife divorced you?"

"Two years ago. In America."

The admissions fell reluctantly from his lips.

"I've sometimes wondered," she said slowly, "just how long her courage would hold out."

"Well, now you know," he answered, petulantly.

She had often pictured meeting Kelly again, but she had never imagined that the meeting would go like this. They seemed to have plunged into the middle of things, without even a pretence at preliminaries.

After a moment she said:

"I suppose you think that the daughter of a duke will be a great help to your career? And you feel you have no time to waste. For success has brought with it a threat of—" she looked him up and down—"no, you are not *fat;* shall we say—of sleekness?"

The look of agonised vanity with which he raised his eyes to hers was nearly pathetic. She moved away.

"Lady Geraldine is pretty poor stuff, but I don't think any woman quite deserves *you,*" she said.

He made a movement to follow her.

"Is that a threat?" he demanded.

"Do you read it that way?"

"What are you going to do?"

"The simplest thing to do will be just to *tell* her, I should think."

"Tell her what?"

"The truth, Nicko. Believe me, I'll only *need* to tell her the truth."

He made an angry exclamation and looked as if he were going to follow her, but halted abruptly as Bella came running into the corridor full tilt, calling out as she saw Hetty:

"Het, I'm lost! These corridors are so queer . . . I can't find the ball-room . . . Oh!" She broke off on seeing Kelly, and Hetty, catching her arm, said quickly:

"Come along, I'll show you . . ." and bore her off so hurriedly that she missed the look Bella flung over her shoulder to Kelly, and the response to it, which he, in spite of his recent discomfiture, almost instinctively gave.

Once round the corner, Bella whispered:

"Het, that *couldn't* have been Nickolas Kelly, was it?"

"Yes," answered Hetty. "How did you know?"

"Oh, Het, it's been my *dream* to meet him! I've seen him on the pictures. Isn't he *glorious!*"

"No, there's nothing glorious about Nickolas Kelly," said Hetty shortly.

"But you *know* him. I didn't know you did. You've never told me."

"I haven't seen him for years."

"Het, you weren't ever in love with him, were you?"

Hetty hesitated a moment, then:

"Yes, I was . . . Ages ago. He wasn't anybody then."

"And . . . but no . . . he *couldn't* ever have been in love with you . . . I mean, you couldn't ever have had the heart to let him go if you'd ever had a real chance of him."

"Oh yes, he was quite a bit in love with me, too. Or thought he was, which is much the same, I suppose . . ."

"How could you ever have been such a fool?"

"Well, Bella, he was such a liar; he was married and pretending to be engaged to me at the same time. That's the sort of gloriousness he goes in for . . ."

"I shouldn't have cared so long as he loved me . . . Oh the *glory* of being loved by Nickolas Kelly! Honestly, I don't see what a man like that could have seen in you."

"Your ideas of love are rather terrifyingly pagan, Bella."

Just outside the studio, they got into a crush of people; Hetty looked round for Ben, but didn't see him. She caught sight of Lady Geraldine, and raised a greeting hand, then pushed a pathway towards her, and laid a hand on her arm. Geraldine turned back to her, saying:

"Yes? Did you want me?"

Hetty drew her to one side, letting the crowd jostle by.

"Nickolas Kelly is no good to anyone," she said abruptly.

Lady Geraldine stared.

Hetty explained further; giving details.

"You can do as you like, of course," she finished. "But I had to let you know."

Geraldine was angry at first, then said:

"Oh, thanks very much," as if it all meant nothing at all to her, nodded, and went on her way.

Hetty looked round for Bella, but Bella had vanished.

"Carried off by the all-conquering seven, I suppose," she thought and wondered where Ben was, a touch piqued that he had not waited for her. She wandered round for a while, but didn't find him; then got caught up in Lady Dulcibella's party, which included Florence Martineau and one or two others she had known during the days of her engagement to Alan Dacres, and found it impossible to get away again.

Lady Dulcibella bore them all off to her dressing-rooms, a charming suite comprising a boudoir, a bath-room, a wardrobe room and a tiny kitchenette.

"Quite, we flatter ourselves, after the manner of the Americans," she said, as her maid dispensed excellent coffee, sandwiches, and cigarettes.

The party settled down apparently for the evening.

"Has anyone a deserted partner on his conscience?" Lady Dulcibella asked. No one had; they were all partnered with each other. Hetty cut off her one valid means of escape by shaking her head with the rest.

But as time went on, and still no one seemed inclined to move, she supplied herself with another excuse. Bella. She thought she really *ought* to go and see what Bella was doing. . . .

Gradually she got away, but it was now getting on for midnight; the corridors were alive with couples trooping towards the supper room. Such a lively orchestra of voices and laughter, and a dainty drumming of little heels . . .

She couldn't find Bella. She saw Lady Geraldine going in to the supper room with Augustus Hammond; so she guessed that the little scatterbrain had taken her advice about Kelly.

Then turning a corner, she nearly ran into Ben's arms.

She looked up gladly into his face.

"I was looking for you," she said simply.

"And I for you," he answered.

"I was with Lady Dulcibella; in her dressing-room . . . Where were you, Ben? When I got back from seeing to Bella's frock you'd gone."

"I judged you'd be some time, so I went to try and find ——— Kelly," he said, abruptly.

Her eyes widened.

"But why?"

"I wanted to . . . have a look at him." He looked down steadily into her face.

"Did you find him?"

"No. And when I got back to the studio door you were nowhere."

"I'd been, and gone again . . . I'm sorry. Ben, have you seen Bella?"

"Not lately. Isn't she with you?"

"No. She's trailing seven adorers wherever she goes . . . She *does* get so excited . . . Admiration goes straight to her head . . ."

"Seven!" he said. "Safety in such numbers, surely?"

"I suppose so . . . But I hadn't meant to leave her so long."

"Perhaps she's having supper. Let's look."

They went into the crowded supper room. Bella was not there . . .

"Have supper with me, Hetty?" Ben asked.

"Oh *rather,*" she said, happily, and looked like seventeen again as she said it.

"Go and put on some sort of wrap, and I'll find a table outside. That will be nicer than here, won't it?"

The words were quite prosaic, but something in his tone made her so glad that instead of answering she just looked up and laughed . . . And he, looking down, laughed too. . . .

With the sound of that mingled laughter in her ears, she fled.

He found a table out in the flagged court, and came back through the supper room to the corridor to wait for her.

When she came back to him some ten minutes later, she was white-faced and wide-eyed; carrying her cloak over her arm and letting it drag on the floor. She came up to him swiftly and thrust a piece of paper into his hands.

"Read it, Ben," she said, in a queer voice.

He looked at her sharply; then at the paper; and read the pencilled scrawl:

By the time you read this I shall have eloped. It was love at first sight *absolutely*. He kissed me and it was glorious. He says I am not to say who it is yet. Good-bye for *ever*.

Bella.

P. S. It won't be a bit of good trying to find me, because you don't even know who it is, and you never *could*.

Love from

Bella.

P. S. I suppose you'll get a bit feverish about it, but it won't make any difference. And anyway *you* can't talk, you loved him yourself once.

When he came to the end of it, Ben looked at Hetty again.

"Kelly," he said shortly, and she nodded.

"Where did you find this?"

"Pinned to my cloak. The room was packed . . . I couldn't be any quicker . . ."

"It's Bella's writing?"

"Yes." She put out her hand and leaned on his arm as if she really needed the support. "It's my fault, Ben. I told him I'd tell Geraldine what he was . . . and I did . . . and evidently she's turned him down . . . And this is how he's . . . paying me out . . ."

"And Bella . . . Why is she doing it?"

"Oh, she's so hopelessly unrestrained . . . Any man could do what he liked with her . . . And he's so rottenly handsome and . . . plausible . . ."

Ben nodded.

"Steady, Hetty . . ." He put a hand closely over hers.

"What are we to do? Oh, Ben, I'm in the fog again, and don't know which way to turn! You know what he is . . . What are we to do?"

"Find them."

"How, though . . .?"

He stood still a moment thinking; then he seemed to brace himself up.

"Put your things on and wait for me, here."

He turned away and went quickly into the supper room. Came back again after moments that had seemed to Hetty like ages; took her arm, saying, "Come along . . ." and they went towards the main door, stopping to collect Ben's overcoat and hat at the cloak room, on their way.

He piloted her out to the yard, and they threaded their way between ranks of cars, until they reached the spic-and-span four-seater they had driven down in.

Silently they got in, and he took a map from his pocket and sat still a moment, consulting it. Then handed it, open, to her, and steered the car out into the road.

"Where to, Ben?" she asked, breathlessly.

"Hetty, it's a toss-up. In town he's staying at the Madrid; but he's got a bungalow somewhere a little distance this side of Stow Marbridge; and a yacht on the Crouch, lying off Romansgold Creek . . . That's as definite as I could get it. Town's nearer, but I think the yacht is more likely. We'll have to risk a choice . . ."

"And if he isn't there?"

"No good thinking that . . . I'll find out something, anyway."

"Who told you of this?"

"Geraldine. Kelly had been planning a party for a cruise. That Creek doesn't appear to be marked on the map. At least, its name isn't, but Geraldine was quite certain that it isn't very far from Stow Marbridge . . . So we've got something to go on. And there's a moon to help us . . ."

"I know you'll do every mortal thing you can, Ben," she said, a tense little quiver in her voice.

They dropped to silence again, as he accelerated and sent the car skimming along the deserted, moonlit road.

CHAPTER XXII

They scarcely spoke, except when the question arose of considering their way. Cross-roads meant stopping, sometimes getting out, to examine signposts; studying the map for their next stretch, and they said what was necessary; no more. Then off again, and silence save for the throbbing engine and skimming wheels. . . .

Their first glimpse of the river was a line of silver cutting through the moonlit flatness of the Essex country.

They lost sight of it as the road bent away, and saw it again as they found themselves running parallel with it. It lay upon their right. Just beyond the big trees beside the road were fields, measured off by the dim lines of hedges; beyond the fields a stretch which they took to be marsh land, for it was mazed by creeks—baby branches of the mother river—that gleamed like silver threads in the moonlight.

Farther on, the rise of the sea-wall hid the river, and above it, the masts of boats that were invisible, speared up into the luminous sky.

"Tide's pretty high," observed Ben, breaking a long silence. "That means that Kelly could get off to his yacht quite easily. I don't think we'll bother about the bungalow . . . We'll make straight for the river . . ."

"Ben, wait a minute. What's that light?" she said suddenly.

He slowed down and his eyes followed the direction of her pointing finger.

At some distance, a shallow angle to their right, a square of yellow light shewed patchily through trees.

"It's from a window, I suppose; a very big window, though," he said slowly. "It might be the bungalow . . . We must be very near to Stow Marbridge now . . . Is there a road going off there towards the water?"

Hetty looked at the map; then shook her head.

"No, there's only the road we're on and it bends slightly the other way; only turns back toward the river right *at* Stow Marbridge. There's nothing before."

"Well, there must be some way of getting to that house, if it is a house . . . We'll go on a bit and see."

As he spoke the light was abruptly extinguished; one half of it first; then the other, as if shutters had been closed.

He drove on more slowly, watching for a break in the hedge that would shew some sort of pathway across the fields.

And was presently rewarded, by the sight of a wide open gateway, leading to a rutty wagon road.

He stopped the car and got out to investigate. Hetty, looking after him, saw his tall figure dimly outlined in the ghostly light. He strode away for some distance; then came back and said:

"Looks as if we can get the car along there, right to the water . . . I can't be quite sure how far the track goes. But we may as well find out whether this is Kelly's place."

He got into the car again and turned it in between the gate posts. They went bumping along over the rough road.

Then, not far ahead, out from a clump of trees gleamed a light once more; a small, fitful, swinging light, and the silhouetted figure of a man appeared, carrying a lantern that sent its ray this way and that with his every step.

But he stopped abruptly on seeing the car, and called abruptly:

"Who's that?"

Ben turned on the full power of the headlights, and in their brilliant beam saw that the lantern carrier was a man dressed in the uniform of a chauffeur . . . Kelly's chauffeur? He wondered, and drove the car alongside the hesitating figure before speaking.

Then he pulled up and said:

"Mr. Kelly got back yet?"

The man came a step nearer, held up the lantern and by its light peered into Ben's face.

"Who are you, sir, if you don't mind?" he said, with a mixture of courtesy and doggedness.

"One of Mr. Kelly's party."

He was firing his shots at a venture, and they found at least one of the targets he was aiming at.

"Mr. Kelly never said nothing to me about no party," replied the man firmly. He was a small, wiry man, with a sharp-nosed, small-eyed, rather ratty face; he still kept the lantern held high. So far good, thought Ben. Obviously this *was* Kelly's place; obviously this was Kelly's chauffeur; obviously this chauffeur had driven Kelly and Bella down here from the studios, and equally obviously he knew a good deal more than he was going to reveal, unless it could be shaken from him.

"Shall I find Mr. Kelly up at the bungalow, or has he already gone on board?" enquired Ben pleasantly. So pleasantly, that his air was almost fatuous.

"Mr. Kelly ain't expecting anyone," said the man determinedly. "It's no good 'anging around. I was just going along to shut the gate. So if you'll excuse me. . . ."

As he stepped back, Ben's hand shot out and closed upon the back of his collar.

" 'Ere! 'Ere!" cried the startled man, the pressure most uncomfortable upon his throat.

"Now then tell me what I want to know." The pleasantness was conspicuously lacking from Ben's tone now.

"Did you drive Mr. Kelly down here?"

"Let go me collar; I can't 'ardly breave!"

Ben shook him before slightly relaxing his hold.

"Did you?" he repeated.

The man realised that he was up against a force greater than himself.

"Yes," he said abruptly.

"Where did you start from?"

"The Golden Dawn fillum stoodio."

"Was there a lady in the car?"

"Yes."

"And you brought them both here?"

"Yes."

"How long ago?"

"Above the 'alf-hour. Mr. Kelly took the gal into the bungalow to change 'is clothes."

Hetty crushed a hand over her mouth to stifle a cry.

Ben went on.

"Are they there now?"

The man hesitated.

"I seen 'em go in," he said at last; "leggo me collar. I swear I seen 'em go in . . ."

Without releasing his hold of the collar, Ben got out of the car . . .

Hetty scrambled out after him.

"Take me into the bungalow," Ben said to the man.

"Leggo me collar, then."

"Not yet."

He began to kick viciously, but an extra wrench on the collar made him go limp.

"All right," he said with sullen docility.

"Can you manage, Hetty?" said Ben.

"Yes, yes. Don't worry about me." She bunched her cloak around her and went after them toward the bungalow, the rough ground painfully distinct through her thin shoes.

They turned through a clearing in the hedges to the left of the wagon track into a newly laid-out garden; the bungalow, all white and gleaming in the moonlight, lay before them.

Ben strode towards it, almost dangling the little chauffeur at his side.

The door was ajar and he pushed it wide and entered.

The manner in which he swept through the fair-sized bungalow, going from room to room, trailing the little chauffeur, might have been comic, if it hadn't been so intensely serious.

No signs of life shewed in the dining-room, drawing-room or kitchen quarters.

Kelly's own bedroom, easily recognisable by the choiceness of its appointments, was almost undisturbed; the bed still made; a dressing-gown over the back of a chair, slippers beneath. . . . But there were dress-clothes flung untidily upon the bed. Ben plunged out of the room and into the next; unoccupied, too.

Unceremoniously plunging into the next, he disturbed the sedate slumbers of the housekeeper, who sat up in bed and opened her mouth, all set for a good scream.

But Ben said abruptly.

"Don't yell. . . . I'm looking for Mr. Kelly; where is he?" and his tone held her silent.

It was a moment before the agitated lady could do anything but just sit there, open-mouthed and staring.

And when she could talk again, she could say nothing useful.

Mr. Kelly had come in very late, but not so late as she'd expected. His supper was all set and he had told her to put him some up in a hamper and when she'd done that, he'd told her to get off to bed. . . . She declared she didn't know what things was coming to and she'd always said she'd live to see murder done, the goings on were that awful . . ."

"And as for you, Mr. Bickers,"—she lashed out at the dangling chauffeur—"you'd aught to be ashamed of yourself . . ."

"Shut your 'ead," snarled the man, and Ben finished the scene by dragging him out of the room and slamming the door behind them.

In the corridor, he put such a painful wrench on the collar in his hand, that Mr. Bickers began to look a bit pop-eyed.

"Now then, you darn little liar," he said, "Where's Kelly? Tell me and tell me *quick,* or by God, I'll . . ."

"I'll tell you!" gasped the almost choking man. . . . "Leggo for the love o' Gord . . ."

Ben's hand relaxed a little; Bickers caught a breath.

" 'E's on the water and *hoff* be this time," he spluttered, his ratty eyes malicious.

"Take me down to the water, then, before I choke you. And if he's off already, watch out for yourself, that's all. Can I run the car any nearer to the river?"

Bickers told him he could.

On their way to the car, Ben stopped. "It'll probably be easy enough to find a boat, but oars are doubtful. Does Kelly keep any of his tackle here?"

Bickers led the way to the garage.

"There's an old pair o' oars 'ere," he said, collecting them from a corner, "which Mr. Kelly says as I could 'ave."

"All right; bring them; *hurry.*"

Presently they were bumping their way along the wagon track again. Bickers was malicious, but he was also afraid. He did not feel inclined to play any further tricks. He ran the car to within a hundred yards of the sea wall. He had deliberately held up Ben's pursuit of Kelly by misleading him into the bungalow,

in order to give Kelly time to get off, but now when he looked at Ben's face and felt the strength of that hand on his collar, he began fervently to pray that Kelly hadn't yet got off.

Ben thought it safe to let go of him now, and released him, in order to take off his own tie and collar, coat and waistcoat, and to roll up his shirt sleeves. He inwardly congratulated himself that his shirt was of the soft-fronted, tucked variety; not starched to the rigidity of a breast plate. Dress clothes are not suited to an adventure of this kind. He tied his braces belt-wise, tight round his waist, and thus freed, he reached over into the body of the car and gave his overcoat to Hetty, telling her to wear it instead of her cloak. She obediently made the change, turning up the sleeves to bring them somewhere near the length of her arms. So that when they got out of the car, they looked considerably different from what they had looked when they got into it.

They crossed a stretch of rough grass and then clambered up the slope of the sea-wall, grassy, too, on the land side. Standing on top they looked out over the river, nearly a mile broad at this point with the tide at the full, shining in the moonlight, still as polished steel. Silhouetted boats lay dreamily at their moorings. Not a breath of wind stirred the air; the gentlest lapping of the river against the big stones of the wall was the only sound.

"Where is Kelly's boat?" demanded Ben.

"Lays a bit further down. See 'er with the two masts? Well, somewhere alongside of 'er. . . . I can't be sure exactly in this light," answered Bickers. "Star of Eve, her name is."

"What crew has he got?"

"Skipper and three men."

"It's not a very large boat, then?"

"Thirty tonner."

"Are they all with him to-night?"

"Yes. I drove down into Marbridge and knocked 'em up, soon as we got 'ere. . . . I was just giving the car a bit of a posh up, when you came along . . ." Bickers' tone added "blast you," as clearly as any tone could.

"I suppose it was the light in the garage we saw," commented Hetty.

Ben turned from left to right, his eyes searching the water's

edge for a serviceable boat. A short distance along he saw what he wanted: a good-sized dingey.

Pushing Bickers before him, he strode along the two-foot path on top of the wall, until he was more or less level with the boat.

Then kicked off his pumps, pulled off his socks, rolled his trousers above his knees, and began to descend the wall on the water side. Just above the tide line, he found the dingey's painter, and pulled her in.

"You'll go with us." he said to Bickers, and the chauffeur nodded, resigned.

A moment later, Ben was sending the tubby little boat over the steely water, heading for the point Bickers had indicated.

Fortunately, the tide had touched its height and was just at the slack before turning. So he had nothing against him. He pulled strongly and without speaking. The sound of the oars rhythmically turning in the crutches and the dip and drip of the blades at each stroke were the only sounds to disturb the silence.

Half way of the distance, voices reached them; men's voices.

"That'll be them," said Bickers, keeping his voice low, for he was in a mortal funk by this time.

"Yes," added Hetty quickly. "I can see them now; two men; on the deck of that white boat . . . More to your right Ben."

Ben pulled the boat round a bit.

"Now you're heading straight for her," she told him. "They're leaning over the side towards the bow."

"Dropping their moorings. . . . That means they're off. . . . You won't catch 'em now," said Bickers.

Ben wasted no time in words; he was two-thirds of the way now, and put every ounce of his strength into his stroke.

"There's another man now . . . come up from the cabin . . . Ben, he's seen us. . . . He's pointing us out. . . . Oh, Ben . . ."

"Look lively, there!" came a voice and Hetty saw the third man make a gesture towards the other two.

"Skipper Haynes," said Bickers.

Ben's jaw squared: his hands on the oars shot forward, pulled back, and the little boat seemed to leap ahead. The puttering of the Star of Eve's motor sounded out just as the dingey slid

alongside, but she was not yet under way. Ben shipped his oars, picked up the painter, stood up and grabbed for the yacht's gunwale.

It was not in the least a seamanlike boarding. Ben only knew that he'd got to get aboard and did not bother about style. He just managed to do it, as Skipper Haynes shut off the engine and came to challenge him.

"I want to see Kelly," Ben told him before he could get his challenge worded. "If anyone tries to stop me I'll knock him to hell."

Haynes was a peaceable man. He'd spent his life on gentlemen's yachts, and it was an easy, genteel life, if you *did* sometimes have to turn your blind eye to some of the goings on. . . . But nothing like this half-dressed huge-shouldered, furious-eyed young man who now confronted him, had ever come into his experience before.

Perhaps he was confused for a moment; perhaps he inwardly knew that Ben's cause was righteous. Anyway he hesitated.

Ben thrust the dingey's painter into Hayne's hand.

"Make fast my dingey," he commanded and turned to reach down his hands to help Hetty on board. Bickers decided to remain in the dingey.

"I must see Bella," Hetty said excitedly. "Let me find her, Ben."

"Keep clear," he warned. "There may be a scrap. Where is he?" He turned on the skipper. "In the cabin?"

Haynes hesitated again; then nodded.

Ben gave Hetty's hand a squeeze, and left her.

She saw him bending his tall head as he went down the companionway, and flew after him, leaning down and looking into the cabin.

Side by side on one of the bunks, Kelly and Bella were sitting. He was dressed after the fashion of the complete yachtsman now—Kelly still rather over-particularised his clothes—and his arm was around Bella. He was looking into her face with deadly, practised eyes. Her face was very pink, her eyes excited, but she was drawing away from him, as if, above everything else, she were a little scared. Perhaps some sort of realisation of the irrevocableness of what she was doing had assailed her. Anyway,

she was drawn slightly from him. On the table before them, were the details of a cold supper; prominently placed were a bottle of champagne and glasses. By the arrangement of the plates Hetty judged that they had been sitting on either side of the table and that Kelly had come round to Bella. Engaged in his lovemaking he had not heard the disturbance on deck, and was utterly taken by surprise when Ben from the cabin doorway said:

"Shall I smash you down here, or would you prefer that I did it up in the open?"

Kelly let go of Bella and edged away to the far side of the table. His face wore the expression that Hetty remembered when his wife confronted him in the teashop that awful day years ago. An expression that suggested some kind of disintegration.

"What? Where did . . .? How did . . .?" he began, stammering. But Ben cut him short by reaching out a hand and catching his collar, as he had caught Bickers.

"Come on up," he said briefly, and he unceremoniously pulled Kelly round between the empty bunk and the table.

Suddenly Bella, who had been too taken aback to do anything but sit and stare, rose excitedly and cried out:

"Ben!" and Hetty, listening from above, heard a sudden cry of relief in her pronouncement of the name.

Struggling, kicking, threatening, spluttering, Kelly was dragged up to the deck. As Ben released him he stumbled and called to his men:

"Haynes . . . Raddy . . . George . . . Why the devil don't you come! Tilson, come and fling him overboard," he cried out, with an attempt at authority and dignity.

The three men sidled closer, waiting to see what Haynes would do.

Haynes was in a painful position. If he deserted Kelly, he saw his very lucrative job going west. If he helped Kelly he would be helping—and he knew it—a particularly dirty business.

He hesitated, then took a step nearer; the crew of three followed suit. For a moment it looked as if they were closing in upon Ben.

Ben swung round and faced them, setting his feet firmly.

"You, Haynes!" he cried. "Have you a daughter? You

others . . ." He turned on the crew. "Have you sisters? Sweethearts? Do you care what becomes of them? If you do just stand clear, that's all I ask of you!"

"Don't listen to him . . ." cried out Kelly. "There's twenty pounds a piece for you . . ." He broke off, for Haynes with an expressive action of dusting his hands together, as if to rid them of something noxious, muttered:

"I'm a father myself . . . You can settle that between you . . ." and moved towards the stern, beckoning the men to follow and stand clear . . .

"Hetty, get down to the cabin, quick," ordered Ben, and as she slithered down the companion way, Bella fell through the cabin doorway into her arms.

Ben swung round on Kelly.

"Now, then, you flabby rotter, fight." Kelly saw there was nothing for it. He took off his coat, stooped to lay it on the deck, straightened suddenly, spun round and drove his fist straight for Ben's jaw. Ben was off guard, so the trick was partly successful, he jerked aside just in time to avoid the full force of the blow, which glanced stingingly off his ear.

"Oh the mean beast! The mean beast!" cried Bella, with a masterly forgetfulness of her own responsibility in the matter. "Did you see what he did to Ben, Het?"

They strained up to look over the level of the deck.

Hetty, her face white in the moonlight, her eyes wide and dark, and her heart thumping painfully, nodded.

But Ben seemed rather pleased than aggrieved by Kelly's shabby strategy.

"So you *are* going to fight?" he said. "So much the better."

All the same it was scarcely fighting. Kelly was blind mad, and gained for a time the false strength of his madness. But his flesh was habitually luxurious and it was no lasting match against a man who had not listened to the preaching of the gospel of physical fitness for nothing.

Ben gave before Kelly's first wild onslaught, and Kelly thought he was triumphing. He sprang at Ben, striking out wildly and they stumbled round the cabin top together.

But in the free deck space forward of the cabin, Ben became

deadly earnest, and Kelly felt his fatal handsomeness being thoroughly and systematically impaired by Ben's slogging left.

"This," Ben was saying grimly. "This has been the devil of a time coming to you, Kelly, but now it has reached you, you're getting it with accumulated interest. Fight . . . For the love of Mike, fight . . . This is simply slaughter . . ."

For Kelly's spurious strength had dwindled. His defence went down, and he, with a groan, followed it. He crumpled to his knees, stretched out his arms, and pitched forward over the cabin top. . . .

Hetty left Bella and went quickly towards Ben.

Ben was bending above Kelly, breathing fast, fists still clenched, but Kelly only rocked feebly, from side to side, and groaned.

Ben offered advice.

"Get them to take you home and put you into a bath, hot as you can bear it . . . And after that steer clear of me and mine . . . Understand?" . . .

There was no answer from Kelly, but Haynes and the men came forward and were looking down at him, too.

"That looks as if he'd *ought* to understand in future, sir," Haynes said, reflectively, and stooping, he took Kelly by the shoulders, turned him over, and made him sit up on the deck, his back against the cabin.

Tears were coursing down the now rather mountainous geography of his face; and when he raised his shamed and tortured eyes the first person he saw was Hetty.

Just for a moment they remained still, eyes meeting; his agonised, hers, very, very, grave.

Then, from the top of the companion way, Bella suddenly broke into loud, hysterical weeping.

CHAPTER XXIII

BELLA wept steadily till they were on land again; sitting in the stern of the dingey beside Hetty, she huddled down onto Hetty's shoulder and roared with the un-restraint of a child. The excitement had been too much for her; tension had been high. She was noisily celebrating its snapping.

Hetty comforted her as best she could, but the more she comforted, the louder Bella roared.

She was in such a collapsed state by the time they landed, that Ben had to pick her up bodily and carry her to the top of the wall.

But once he'd got on his socks and shoes and was ready to start for the car again, he went up to her, stood before her, and said:

"Shut up," with great clearness and force. And Bella with a quick upward look, said hurriedly:

"Yes, Ben," and—shut up.

By the time they had reached the car, reaction had gone one step further; a quiet step; Bella was yawning; her feet were stumbling drowsily in the tangling grass.

They tucked her up in the back seat, with her cloak and a rug, and by the time Ben had hurriedly put on his discarded things again, she was actually fast asleep.

Silently, Hetty gave Ben his overcoat, wrapped herself again in her cloak; silently she got into the front of the car beside him.

It was not until he had brought the car through the gateway and out into the road again that she spoke.

Then she said, quietly, a little tremulously:

"Ben, I can never thank you—that's impossible—for what you have done for Bella to-night."

"For Bella?" he broke in quickly. "Well, yes, I suppose so, but that's been coming to Kelly ever since the first day he went into Fontaine's shop and looked at *you*."

Her questions were answered; her doubts stilled, she leaned

back into her corner of the car, her heart beating fast in exultant certainty.

Another mile or two of gritty Essex road slid away beneath their wheels before he spoke again.

Then he said suddenly:

"No, I'm not, and never have been, the least in love with Lady Geraldine."

Looking misty-eyed at his profile, she answered:

"I don't need to be told that—now," so softly, that he turned sharply and said:

"What?"

She looked up into his eyes, and repeated what she had said.

While that look between them held, it was lucky that there was nothing in the deserted road, to challenge the car's right to behave exactly as it liked.

Then he drew a breath and returned his attention to the wheel, and asked:

"Why did you think I might be?"

She answered with another question, which rather dodged the issue:

"Why did you write and tell me you were cured?"

"I thought I was. I *wanted* to be."

"You *wanted*. . . . Oh, Ben!"

"I was so fed up with being *hurt*."

"How did you find out that you weren't cured?"

"Just seeing you again shewed me."

"The first minute?"

"The first second. I tried mighty hard to remain cured, but I couldn't."

"And then I knew that I was cured, too—of *not* loving you."

"Well don't sit right over there in that unfriendly corner," he said, inconsequently. She laughed softly as she shifted closer to him.

"Why did you come to see me, Ben?"

"Because I couldn't keep away from you."

"So the plans were just a stupid excuse?" she challenged.

"Quite stupid: I admit it."

"And when I asked for your friendship again. Ben, did you think I meant *only* friendship?"

"That was the next thing I had to find out about."

"You were very . . . methodical," she said.

"I didn't think that I was under any obligation to go through more than I need. If there was a chance of your loving me, I was not going to let you miss it for lack of opportunity; but if there didn't seem to be any chance of it . . . Well, that was going to be quite bad enough, without my making it worse by hanging round and collecting a new set of tormenting memories of you."

"Was that why you went away for three whole weeks?" she began.

"That was business—partly; but I thought it wouldn't do either of us any harm to have time to think a bit."

"I didn't *need* to think any more. It only gave me time to get thoroughly scared."

"About Geraldine?"

"Yes; you . . ." and now came the true answer to his first question. . . . "You let her *paw* you, Ben."

He raised his face and laughed at that; and she turned and looked out into the dimness of the road. He looked down at her and beyond the smooth curve of her cheek just saw the sensitive tremble of her lips. He bent his head swiftly.

"You don't think I lose my head for *that* sort of thing?" he whispered.

He kissed her cheek; softly; tentatively; experimentally almost, as if he'd a lot, still, to find out about her.

Whatever mark her scare over Geraldine had cut, vanished then. She turned back quickly, her face against his shoulder, and looked up at him with just a hint of mischief in her shining eyes:

"Don't you *ever* . . . lose your head, Ben?" she asked.

"Here," he said, "you mustn't vamp the man at the wheel, or we'll have a smash."

Back at the flat, they woke Bella, and took her upstairs.

While Hetty put her to bed she gave a contrite account of her evening's craziness.

"I introduced myself to him, Het. . . . He looked so *glorious;* I told him I was your sister . . . And he took me out into those sort of fields at the back of the studio and said he loved me the very second he saw me; like he'd never loved

anyone, not even you. . . . And he kissed me till I couldn't breathe, or think . . . But oh, Het, I was a bit afraid when I got to the yacht. It seemed so far away, and the sailor men looked at me so queerly . . . and *he* seemed different, too, somehow . . . I got a sudden, awful, *alone* sort of feeling. And when Ben came, Kelly seemed more different than ever. Why, even ugly old Ben looked more glorious than *he* did . . ."

She got into bed, and Hetty tucked her up. Bella put up her arms and drew Hetty down to her . . .

"Oh, Het darling, put your arms round me and hug me like you used to when I was a kid . . ."

Hetty hugged her. Bella wasn't, and never could be, the Bella of her dreams; but she was Bella . . . And Hetty hugged her close, the sting of tears in her eyes. . . .

She had left Ben in the sitting room, but going to find him, she found him in the little kitchen. He was busy at the gas stove and turned as he heard her enter.

"Hot milk," he explained.

And memory sent time spinning backwards. . . . She saw him as the queer figure he had been the night of the fog; the night their friendship began. . . . Yes, and the lock was down over his forehead again. No matter what he might do, what he might achieve, he would always be that boy.

When he poured the milk into a glass and gave it to her, she could hardly drink it for the quaking of her throat.

"Do you want to give Bella some, too?" he asked.

"She's asleep," she answered. She finished the milk and set down the glass. He was standing a few paces from her, looking down at her.

"You must sleep too," he said.

"Yes," she whispered. "And you. . . . You must need it . . . Ben, did he hurt you?"

"Kelly? No."

She was suddenly shy of herself and of him. Perhaps he saw it, for without speaking further, they went out into the hall and to the door.

On the landing outside, they parted; but it wasn't easy.

Out through the long landing window a grey dawn was turning

to day above the house-tops. The world seemed held breathless in the stillness that lies between night and morning.

She took a step away from him—and seemed to take it because she so much didn't want to.

He put out both hands to stop her retreat; but scarcely had to stop it, for as his hands came towards her, hers came out to meet them and just for a moment they stood, hands clinging, eyes meeting.

Then he said unsteadily—and seemed to say it because he so completely wasn't thinking it:

"Your dress is all stained with the salt water . . ."

And caught her up close in his arms . . . In stumbling, broken words he gave her the love and fidelity of years. . . .

She yielded herself to his arms, hurt by the strength of him—and in heaven at being hurt by it; raised her face to his, with the dawn in her eyes, and gave him love for love. . . .

* * * * * *

They were married in the Autumn.

By that time Ben's house was ready for them, and after the simple ceremony in town, of which Bella and the Guardian Angel were the chief witnesses, they went straight to it.

The Guardian Angel had taken over Hetty's flat. She had also taken over Bella; everyone, even Bella, was highly satisfied with the plan. The Guardian Angel revelled in it. It supplied her, she declared, with a real "life's work."

Ben's house stood in the middle of a garden; and the garden was set in the greenest of Hertfordshire fields. There was an apple orchard at one side, shewing ruddy fruit above a red-brick wall. A river glinted in the distance and pine trees spired up into a sky of flawless blue. . . .

Birds shrilled a welcome from the hedgerows as Mr. and Mrs. Ben Jones paused in front of their own white gate and looked at each other, and then at the house at the end of the neat flagged path, and then down at their hands resting on the gate-top. One slender hand, of the four that rested there, was adorned with a brave little ring; new as the new house; bright as the spring day. . . .

A bigger hand covered it.

"Christen the house, Hetty," said Ben. "That's one of the things I've left to you. Think of a name for it."

"The Elms," said Hetty promptly, screwing up her eyes at him, sideways.

"But why?"

"Because there are nothing but pine-trees to be seen for miles."

"Why not 'The Laurels,' for the same reason?" he objected, laughing like a happy boy.

"Yes, if you like. Or . . . Ben, give me a pencil. I'll write the name; in teeny little letters; so that only you and I can find it . . ."

His pockets yielded a stump of yellow pencil; and on the pristine white of the gate post, she recorded the name she had chosen; so small that he had to look close to read it.

The Elms? The Laurels? No. Just four letters:

H-O-M-E.

"But Hetty," he said, after a moment. "There's just th Ships aren't launched in the domestic bath-tub. What about Hetty?"

She laughed self-consciously.

"Hadn't this piece of news reached you?" she began a paused.

"What piece of news?" he asked.

She looked up then, with eyes that never had been so starry

"Why, that I'm *sorry* for poor Helen of Troy!" she said softly

He pushed open their own white gate and with her hand through his arm, close against his heart, they went up to the house. . . .

THE END

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